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*Nepantla* as Indigenous Middle Space:  
Developing Biblical Reading Strategies for Queer Latina/os

BY

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***Nepantla* as Indigenous Middle Space:  
Developing Biblical Reading Strategies for Queer Latina/os**

By Michael A. Diaz

Abstract:

Biblical reading strategies are continually emerging for oppressed peoples, including Latina/os and LGBT folk. The indigenous principle of *nepantla* (middle space) serves as a distinct and profitable hermeneutic in defining the unique queer Latina/o experience and opens the door to beneficial biblical reading strategies. When using queer experiences of indigenous Mesoamerica to inform and expand cultural memory, queer Latina/os are able to develop biblical reading strategies that affirm rather than negate one's existence. After utilizing the lens of *nepantla* to recover a queer Latina/o indigenous identity and reinterpreting the Syrophoenician passage from a Tex(t)-Mex perspective, this thesis identifies reading strategies for queer Latina/os to use when approaching scripture within the local church.

## **DEDICATION**

Para El Viejito

*Tú estás siempre en mi mente.*

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## INTRODUCTION

When I took my first synoptic gospels class course in college at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, I began a journey towards liberation I never could have imagined. Before college, all I wanted to do was travel the world and preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and get people “saved.” Because of the change in my life that happened as a result of religion and the bible, I wanted to see change in other peoples’ lives. My interpretation of the bible gave me a conviction that I knew all there was to know about my faith in Jesus, so I felt the need to convince others of the truth God gave me. In my synoptic gospels class, though, I learned that there was so much to the bible I did not know and did not want to know. I did not want to hear about form criticism or a *historical* Jesus or literary devices utilized by gospel writers who wanted to tell good stories! I wanted a clear word of God manifested in a bible that was much simpler and easier to interpret. I feared that a diverse and complex bible would only prohibit me from spreading the gospel as I knew it, and it did. My academic studies over the following years forced me to come to grips with scriptures that are both messy and shameful. The bible is full of violence and evil acts, yet it contains a message of peace and good news. Tragedy, heartbreak, and oppression are clearly evident, but so are joy, hope, and liberation. Indeed, the complex bible is more relevant to human life than the simple erroneous gospel in which I used to believe.

From the beginning of my academic studies, not only was I challenged to learn the historical, social, and cultural context of scripture but I was also challenged to challenge others. Through my own particular lens of reading the bible (which will be

discussed later in chapter 3), I have challenged myself and others to do prophetic ministry with the homeless, imprisoned, and all marginalized folk. Whereas many Chicanos<sup>1</sup> from my community in Texas chose to vilify recent Latino<sup>2</sup> immigrants, I have resisted such an oppressive view and marched with immigrants who demanded their dignity and sacred value. As Jesus mass organized in the wilderness areas of Galilee, I have worked to organize immigrants and in doing so, have been challenged to live my life out in the borderland areas of my society in order to proclaim hope and good news to those most at risk. Moving from a place of vilifying to affirming of immigrants was not an easy place or realization to come to though.

I am a follower of Jesus, an ordained clergyperson, who is active in full-time ministry in Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC).<sup>3</sup> My history and experience allows me to identify specifically as a gay Chicano and more generally as a queer<sup>4</sup> Latino. In my ministries at local MCC congregations, I have encountered folks from various Latina/o backgrounds. From Cuban to Mexican to Venezuelan to Argentinean, I

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<sup>1</sup>I use the term *Chicana/os* to refer to Latina/os of Mexican descent who have been born and raised in the United States. Though synonymous with *Mexican-Americans*, *Chicana/os* is a political term that rose out of the civil rights era of the 1960s and 70s.

<sup>2</sup>Although *Latina/o* and *Hispanic* are sometimes used interchangeably, there are some differences between the two terms. Hispanics *are* folks whose ancestry can be traced back to Spain whereas *Latina/os* have cultural roots from Latin America. In my opinion, *Latina/o* is a much more inclusive term that privileges pre-Hispanic America's indigenous roots.

<sup>3</sup>Metropolitan Community Churches was founded in 1968 as a Christian Church with a primary ministry to the members of the LGBT community.

<sup>4</sup>I use the term *queer* to refer to members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities and their allies.

have learned that not all Latina/os can be grouped into the same categories, especially with regard to cultural nuances. Some Latina/os speak Spanish while others do not. Those who do speak Spanish all have different dialects. Religiously, not all Latina/os are Catholic or Evangelical and even though I enjoy reading the bible, many Latina/os do not. Such a dynamic caused me to wonder how might Spanish or Latina/o ministries in MCC work more effectively, given such cultural differences and, especially, theological differences among Latina/os. Due to my exposure to the field of Latina/o Theologies in seminary, I initially looked to what scholars have to say, specifically regarding the question, “How do Latina/os read the bible?”

### **Latina/o Biblical Hermeneutics**

All Christian traditions ascribe some sort of authority to scripture when it comes to matters of faith, but the acknowledgement of such authority varies with each specific religious tradition/experience. According to Latina/o scholars Miguel De La Torre and Edwin Aponte, Latina/o Christians are no different than others we find across Christendom in terms of the various levels of scriptural authority, but Latina/o Christians bring with them a specific cultural experience that informs how one interprets scripture.<sup>5</sup> Of course, there is no “one” Latina/o interpretation of the bible.

Because every Latina/o cultural and sociopolitical experience is different, the bible is read differently from the eyes of Mexicans, Chicanos, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and so on. For Justo Gonzalez, social conditions such as poverty, racial/ethnic

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<sup>5</sup>Miguel A. De La Torre and Edwin Aponte, *Introducing Latino/a Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 74.

discrimination, and citizenship status, cause Hispanics to read the bible from positions of marginality, exile, and solidarity.<sup>6</sup> Justo Gonzalez talks about reading the bible in Spanish. He does not mean Hispanics literally read the bible in Spanish, but that when Hispanics do read scripture, they bring a sense of otherness with their Latina/o experience.<sup>7</sup>

Going beyond notions of literal and allegorical interpretations of scripture, scholars such as Segovia interpret scripture using a hermeneutics of the diaspora. He writes, “It is a framework that I refer to as a hermeneutics of the diaspora, a Hispanic-American hermeneutics of otherness and engagement, whose fundamental purpose is to read the biblical text as an other—not to be overwhelmed or overridden, but acknowledged, respected, and engaged in its very otherness.”<sup>8</sup> Latina/os approach the bible as an “other,” that is as something to be respected and honored, not to be approached with presumptions. In essence, Segovia advocates treating the biblical text like one should treat any person on the margins, without preconditions or assumptions. Instead of approaching the bible with stereotypes and preconceived notions, one should give the text a fresh start, a new beginning. In theory, Segovia’s framework is ideal and noteworthy, but in practice I question whether or not approaching scripture without

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<sup>6</sup>De La Torre and Aponte, *Introducing Latino/a Theologies*, 75.

<sup>7</sup>Eduardo C. Fernandez, *La Cosecha: Harvesting Contemporary United States Hispanic Theology (1972-1998)* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 37.

<sup>8</sup>Fernando F. Segovia, “Toward a Hermeneutics of the Diaspora: A Hermeneutics of Otherness and Engagement” in *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, eds. Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1995), 58.

presumptions is even possible. The problem lies in the fact that everyone brings certain baggage and an agenda when reading scripture. How does one allow for the text to speak for itself without the social location of the reader getting in the way of interpretation? In my opinion, such is virtually impossible.

Segovia also employs a postcolonial optic when approaching scripture. Such terminology (postcolonial) clearly indicates an optic which scholars utilize as opposed to those living in the *barrios*. Of course, lay Latina/os might be using such an optic, but they clearly do not use the term “postcolonial.” Notwithstanding my criticism, Segovia’s postcolonial approach explores attributes of colonial power in the biblical text and explores the perspective of the one reading as one who might very well be colonized.<sup>9</sup> Such a hermeneutic draws from the experience of Latina/os being “aliens” in foreign lands. Cubans who live in the United States, and who are without a homeland here, know very well the alien experience as do other groups of Latina/os.

Mujerista scholar, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz emphasizes interpreting from *lo cotidiano*, the everyday experience of Latina/os in the community.<sup>10</sup> As Latina/os struggle in their daily life, they look to the bible to read stories that emphasize their struggle.<sup>11</sup> In the process, the text is not as important as the need to look for stories that

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<sup>9</sup>Leticia A. Guardiola-Saenz, “Scriptures” in *Handbook of Latina/o Theologies*, eds. Edwin David Aponte and Miguel De La Torre (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 77.

<sup>10</sup>Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 66.

<sup>11</sup>Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 71.

highlight the daily lived struggles of *la lucha*.<sup>12</sup> Such an approach is most promising to queer Latina/os in terms of relating biblical texts to the actual lived experiences of Latina/os.

Even though Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz touches on the idea of *mestizaje*, Virgilio Elizondo more thoroughly reflects on the bible, especially the gospels, through the lens of *mestizaje*.<sup>13</sup> *Mestizaje* originated in the conquest of the New World as a negative theme, creating hostility for both Spaniards and the peoples of the New World. Very early on, issues such as group identity became paramount as a mode for survival in the midst of two cultures. The issue of group identity arises in the experiences of Hispanic Americans today, especially in terms of surviving in the midst of a dominant non-Latina/o population. Many intellectuals like Virgilio Elizondo and Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz attempt to reappropriate *mestizaje* as an experience evidenced in the painful but hopeful process whereby a new people or ethnos is born out of the encounter of two disparate parent peoples.<sup>14</sup> Elizondo describes Jesus as a Galilean “borderland reject” who experiences rejection by his own people in the midst of a Roman Empire and a diverse cultural society, therefore branding Jesus as a product of cultural *mestizaje*.<sup>15</sup> If Jesus was a product of *mestizaje*, then how empowering is it for Latina/os to be products of *mestizaje*.

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<sup>12</sup>Guardiola-Saenz, “Scriptures”, 80.

<sup>13</sup>Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*. Revised Ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 16.

<sup>14</sup>Manuel A. Vasquez, “Rethinking *Mestizaje*,” in *Rethinking Latino(a) Religion and Identity*, eds. Gaston Espinosa and Miguel De La Torre (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 139.

<sup>15</sup>Elizondo, *Galilean*, 54-55.

Similarly, Isasi-Diaz lifts up *mestizaje* as an affirming characteristic for Latina/os given that it contributes to a new understanding of pluralism and embracing of differences in a U.S. Latina/o context.<sup>16</sup> *Mestizaje* resonates well with those Latina/os who deal with hybridity, negotiating multiple identities and cultures in a land that tries to make one choose one identity or culture over another. For example, growing up as a young boy, I not only had to negotiate whether or not to speak Spanish but also to actually fully learn Spanish because of my wanting to “fit” into an American identity and “be” American. *Mestizaje* as a concept allows me and many other Latina/o Americans to embrace bilingualism as something not to be suppressed but celebrated.

### **Queer Problems with Latina/o Biblical Hermeneutics**

Because Latina/o scholars are contextual theologians generally, they write with all Hispanic peoples in mind. It is quite easy, though, to forget that they speak out of their own specific social location and experiences and assume that they are describing a general way in which every single Latina/o interprets scripture. At the beginning of my D.Min. thesis/project, I suspected that the Latina/os in my congregations/communities use the same hermeneutical principles and reading strategies as Latina/o scholars use when they approach scripture (e.g. postcolonial optic, *mestizaje*, otherness). I took several different approaches in testing my hypothesis.

First, I gathered small groups of Latina/os into bible study groups. Every group contained a diverse group of Latina/os ranging from Chicana/os to Puerto Ricans to Mexicans. The majority were U.S. citizens with about a quarter being undocumented

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<sup>16</sup>Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 64.

immigrants. Age ranges varied from 35 to 63 years and religious backgrounds included former Baptists, Catholics, Pentecostals, Evangelical, and non-denominational. The vast majority (almost 85%) grew up in Protestant traditions where they learned to read the bible from more fundamentalist church cultures. In group settings, I asked them how they read scripture. Of course, no one said, “I look for postcolonial themes,” or “I pay attention to the effects of empire in the text.” On the contrary, most responses ranged from, “I open up the bible, and ask God to speak to me,” to “I look for stories that have a moral or lesson to them.” When I pressed further, most “lessons” dealt with themes of stealing, loving, etc. I also sent simple questionnaires with open ended questions such as, “How do you read the bible?” and “What do you look for when you read the bible?” and “What is your agenda when you read the bible?”

The written answers did not differ much from the spoken answers in a group setting. Most reflected that they did not have any agenda when approaching scripture; they simply wanted to hear from God. Some indicated that they only read certain passages that were their favorites. Every single response, though, indicated some type of personalized and/or individualistic need when approaching the bible. Most wanted God to personally speak to them, mainly for inspiration and encouragement.

When I surveyed queer Latina/os in small groups and bible studies, I was honestly caught off guard with what I found. The responses I received were generally no different than other folks—white, black, straight, or gay. Most of my Latina/o congregants did not read the bible through a lens of marginalization, much less through a lens of *mestizaje* or multiple identities. Given that many Hispanics who find their way to MCC come from



more evangelical backgrounds, many tend to stick to the paradigms of literalist interpretations of scripture. When I asked them specifically if they thought their Latina/o identity factored in at all, most folks replied with a resounding, “No!”

I have my suspicions as to why folks did not want to or did not care to think about how their specific cultural ethnic identity factored into the way they read the bible. One: most come from more conservative churches where the only interpretation of the bible that matters is either the pastor’s interpretation or the church’s interpretation of passages. Two: the majority of folks have never been exposed to *mujerista* or *mestiza* notions, at least the way academics describe them. Three: I suspect naming and bringing ethnic identity as a topic into a group setting brings up fears of racism, specifically colorblindness. Even if folks somehow thought their Latina/o identity factored into how they read the bible, most would probably still say “no” because such would be the politically correct thing to say. My original thesis proposed that queer Latina/os in my faith communities utilized distinct and profitable strategies very similar to those proposed by Latina/o scholars, but my surveying of the ways they read scripture proved my initial thesis wrong.

What was I to make of my findings? Were hermeneutics and biblical reading strategies offered by Latina/o scholars purely academic endeavors? Such seems to be the case. Of course, there is the unique factor that almost all of the Latina/os in my faith communities are LGBT. Such may add a wrench into the mixed bag of straight Latina/o

scholars and theologians,<sup>17</sup> but one would think that scholarly proposals would have some sense of “otherness” when researching/discussing biblical reading strategies. My only guess as to why scholarly proposals in Latina/o hermeneutics did not arise organically in my faith community is that the communities from which most Latina/o scholars come are uniquely different and purposeful for their own specific community needs, not mine.<sup>18</sup>

In any case, given that my congregants did not already utilize popular reading strategies offered by Latina/o scholars, I decided to pursue a new direction. Instead of trying to identify how queer Latina/os approach scripture, I decided to propose new biblical reading strategies specific for the LGBT Latina/o community in Metropolitan Community Churches. In subsequent small group meetings, I began sessions not with the bible but other mediums such as a video clip. And then with the particular video clip in mind, as a group we would purposely interpret a certain biblical passage after viewing the video clip. For example, a reading and study of Ham “uncovering” his father’s nakedness in Genesis 9 was preceded by a clip from the movie, “Blood In, Blood Out: Bound by Honor,” a movie about the Mexican Mafia. The movie clip showed an attempted rape scene, illustrating the dynamics of honor and shame with specific regard to sex in prison.

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<sup>17</sup>If any of the major Latina/o scholars are LGBT, they are definitely not “out of the closet” as far as I am able to tell from their writings. I may well be wrong.

<sup>18</sup>Mujerista theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz was recently uninvited to speak at a Catholic educational institution because she delivered a homily at her gay nephew’s wedding ceremony. Though not explicit about pro-gay stances in their academic work, some scholars do find other ways to show support for queer Latina/os. For more information on the Catholic backlash in response to Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, please visit <http://www.truthwinsout.org/blog/2012/03/22816/>.

After the clip, the small group was better able to suspect the possibility of Ham raping his father Noah. Through such a “contextual interpretation,” members of the bible study groups were able to come up with more culturally informed interpretations of scripture rather than individualistic. I then began to think of ways to culturally inform Latina/os in order to bring about more contextual cultural interpretations. The present work is an attempt at such with the goal of identifying reading strategies for queer Latina/os to utilize when approaching scripture.

In chapter one, I explore the indigenous principle of *nepantla* (middle space) as a hermeneutic in defining the unique queer Latina/o experience. In chapter two, I propose an expansion of the queer Latina/o cultural memory to include the queer experiences of indigenous Mesoamerica. Such a recollection will help recover a queer Latina/o indigenous identity and remind Latina/os that a queer presence is long part of the Latina/o historical identity and existence. Recovering an indigenous queer existence will also aid in rooting later proposed biblical reading strategies in the Latina/o community reality. After reminding queer Latina/o folks of the clear queer presence throughout the native populations before and after the conquest of the Americas, in chapter three, I offer an example of using *nepantla* when reading the bible from a Tex-Mex perspective. With a liberation praxis in mind, in chapter four, I will offer elements and criteria for using *nepantla* in developing biblical reading strategies for queer Latina/os, and I will offer a sample curriculum. In conclusion, I will discuss implications for local church ministries and suggest further areas of praxis.

## CHAPTER 1

### NEPANTLA AS A HERMENEUTIC: THE QUEER LATINA/O MIDDLE SPACE

*“...once the tensions of nepantla are understood and confronted, and the native-Self is recovered and continuously healed, nepantla, or the middle space, becomes a psychological, spiritual, and political space that Latinos/as transform as a site of meaning making and healing.”*

-Lara Medina

As the largest minority in the U.S., Hispanics have come out of the shadows to show their presence in the face of American hegemony. Not only are presidential candidates trying to mobilize Latina/os for their political agendas, CNN is now regularly featuring “Latino in America,” a news segment devoted solely to issues of the Latina/o community.<sup>19</sup> In two more decades, the United States is on track to become the “second-largest Spanish-speaking nation in the world.”<sup>20</sup> Though many assimilated Hispanics have achieved the respect of the middle-class, many more Hispanics, especially undocumented immigrants, are forced into the shadows of society. Latina/o theologians in the United States have come a long way in terms of imagining liberating theologies that transcend specific Hispanic identity groups to include Mexicans, Chicanos, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Salvadoran, recent immigrants, and many more. For example, Latino theologian Benjamin Valentin argues that categories of locational specificity, such as cultural identity and theology should not be abandoned but “supplanted and placed within a more comprehensive discursive framework.”<sup>21</sup> Attempts are being made by Latina/o

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<sup>19</sup><http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2009/latino.in.america/htm>.

<sup>20</sup>Harold Recinos and Hugo Magallanes, eds., *Jesus in the Hispanic Community: Images of Christ from Theology to Popular Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), ix.

theologians to unify Latina/os in strong numbers for the purposes of political and social reform, such as Jean-Pierre Ruiz's efforts dealing with scripture and the *Dream Act*, legislation that would provide a path to citizenship for immigrant minors.<sup>22</sup> One group, though, still lives in the shadows of society and has not received due attention from Hispanic religious intellectuals.

Queer Latina/os still struggle to find their place in the American social sphere where Anglo homosexuals are now fighting for marriage/civil union rights and ordination rights within the church. Queer Latinos cannot fully find recognition in Anglo homosexual circles, the church, or even within their own Hispanic communities, yet they are called upon to support the gay rights movement and the Hispanic people's movement. Gays and lesbians are the "new scapegoats of the dominant reality" in both Anglo and Latina/o circles.<sup>23</sup>

Whether scapegoated, left on the margins, or ignored, LGBT Latina/os find themselves in a liminal space—a queer middle space. What social dynamics exist that contribute to an uncomfortable, even frightening and limiting middle space for LGBT Latina/os?

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<sup>21</sup>Benjamin Valentin, *Mapping Public Theology: Beyond Culture, Identity, and Difference* (New York: Trinity Press, 2002), 115.

<sup>22</sup>Jean-Pierre Ruiz, *Readings from the Edges: The Bible and People on the Move* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), 3.

<sup>23</sup>Otto Maduro, "Once Again Liberating Theology? Towards a Latin American Liberation Theological Self-Criticism" in *Liberation Theology and Sexuality*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 27.

### **An Uncomfortable Middle Space**

It is known that many third world peoples have been subjected to colonial tyranny by western forces, many by the U.S., but beyond military and political oppression, Latina/os in the U.S. have strived to maintain a certain cultural identity to offset the cultural imperialism many feel they are enduring. Certain values and ways of life in America, such as extreme individualism and identity apart from one's family, are understood to be universal and normal for all groups, even though such standards and cultural measures have been put in place by the majority, heteronormative population. U.S. Latina/os are keen to such throes, and in response, we labor to enable our own members of the community and others, including those in the dominant majority, "to come to recognize, understand, and respect the significance and importance" of our ways and views.<sup>24</sup> Such an endeavor is part of a larger effort to bring our own views to the table of public discourse. Indeed, in the efforts of Hispanics to gain social capital, queer Latinos take a back seat with regards to their own recognition for the sake of the cause, for the sake of a wider *lucha* (struggle). Of course, other factors have contributed to many queer any notion of homosexuality or "non-normative" sexuality in their so-called liberating discursive practices. Even more humiliating, as Nickoloff alludes, is the void in voice of Christian believers in queer arenas which includes Latina/o Christians.<sup>25</sup> These

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<sup>24</sup>Ismael Garcia, *Dignidad: Ethics Through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 25.

<sup>25</sup>James B. Nickoloff, "Sexuality: A Queer Omission in U.S. Latino/a Theology" *JHTL* 10:3 (2003): 35.

latter points are a given and easily seen to many scholars, but how does *mestizaje* and *machismo* specifically affect queer Latina/os within their communities?

The latter, *machismo*, generally refers to the stereotypical vision of manliness and masculinity in Latina/o culture. It has been viewed as resulting from the warring between the indigenous peoples and the Spanish conquerors by which the *mestizo* (Indian/Spanish mix) conceptualizes the idea of a Spanish conquistador playing the sexually active role and a trampled or raped Indian civilization representing the sexually passive role.

*Machismo* is thus seen as the negation of the feminine within Hispanic men and, as well, the sexual subordination of the feminine.<sup>26</sup> Homosexuality is consequently seen to be at odds with *machismo*, and therefore unacceptable. Similar to ancient Mesopotamian societies where honor and shame ideologies held standard, it has been traditionally thought that the active male or the one who penetrates is usually tolerated and not viewed as being homosexual. It is the passive one in the receptive role who is viewed in a more negative manner although a different view of sexually passive indigenous will be discussed later in chapter 2. Traditionally, it also should be said that effeminacy in any male is never tolerated, or, at least, such has been the traditional way of thinking about sexuality in *Latinidad*.<sup>27</sup> The effeminate males are held in low esteem throughout their lives, always teased, harassed, and the butt of many jokes.<sup>28</sup> As Lumsden analyzes,

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<sup>26</sup>Chris Girman, *Mucho Macho: Seduction, Desire, and the Homoerotic Lives of Latin Men* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004), 44.

<sup>27</sup>*Latinidad* generally refers to the cultural world of Latina/os.

regarding Mexicans, which I believe applies to many Latina/o Americans, it is not so much homosexuality which Latinos are afraid of, but “rather of being seen by others as weak, effeminate, and passive sexual objects,” essentially acting like women.<sup>29</sup> Such ignorant notions of *machismo* contribute to an uncomfortable queer middle space for LGBT Latina/os. There is no room for a queer sexuality when the notion of *machismo* reigns free in Latina/o communities.

A related religious cultural concept that contributes to an uncomfortable queer middle space is the notion of *marianismo*, by which Latinas are expected to abide. *Marianismo* looks at the Virgin of Guadalupe as the standard Latinas emulate, embodying characteristics such as piety, handing down and displaying tradition, helpfulness, selflessness, not asking for help themselves, and among others, not forgetting that sex is for procreation, not pleasure.<sup>30</sup> Growing up in my family, my grandmother was the quintessential “Mary” in that she served as the most pious Catholic in the family, always reminding family members of their history, and always serving my grandfather and deferring to him at all times, even at the cost of being physically abused. Traditionally, Latinas in my family are to defer to men and never act like men themselves, such as making important financial decisions or being the head of household.

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<sup>28</sup>Joseph Carrier, *De Los Otros: Intimacy and Homosexuality Among Mexican Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 18.

<sup>29</sup>Ian Lumsden, *Homosexuality, Society and the State in Mexico* (Toronto: Canadian Gay Archives, 1991), 22.

<sup>30</sup>Nora Lozano-Diaz, “Ignored Virgen or Unaware Women: A Mexican-American Protestant Reflection on the Virgin of Guadalupe,” in *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology: Religion and Justice*, eds. Maria Pilar Aquino and others (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 210.



*Marianismo* also contributes to an uncomfortable queer middle space for LGBT Latina/os. There is no room for a queer sexuality when the notion of *marianismo* reigns free in Latina/o communities.

*Mestizaje* and *marianismo* both originated in the conquest of the New World as a negative theme, creating hostility for both Spaniards and the peoples of the New World. As discussed earlier, scholars such as Virgil Elizondo and Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz attempt to reappropriate *mestizaje* and redeem it by pointing to the hopeful possibilities of a people born in midst of multiple identities.<sup>31</sup> Such a reappropriation is valid, although, the hopeful possibilities have not reached all Latina/os at the grassroots level, especially queer Latina/os. Actually, *mestizaje* has not been directly applied to the queer experience. As a result, U.S. queer Latina/os continue to be people of multiple cultures—Anglo American, Latino, “sexually other.” Many are bilingual, though not all, but I suspect most recognize the different allegiances that are required of them. For example, Latina/os are required to understand that they are Latina/o by way of their families and that they are to support the family for the sake of resisting dominant cultural and for *la lucha*, the struggle to survive daily life. Queer Latina/os are also required to prove allegiance to the United States by speaking better English, working for lower wages, and submitting to Anglo culture and hegemony overall.<sup>32</sup> Chicana/os, for example, must prove to Mexicans

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<sup>31</sup>Manuel A. Vasquez, “Rethinking *Mestizaje*,” in *Rethinking Latino(a) Religion and Identity*, eds. Gaston Espinosa and Miguel De La Torre (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 139.

their Latina/o credentials by speaking grammatically correct Spanish, while at the same time remembering to prove to Anglo Americans their commitment to U.S. Anglo culture without losing respect from either group. Yet again, such a predicament contributes to an uncomfortable queer middle space for LGBT Latina/os. For example, it has been my experience that Anglo circles can provide more refuge for expressing a queer sexuality than in Latina/o circles. But the same haven for expressing one's sexuality may also be an unsafe space for speaking Spanish as that might be seen as un-American. Bilinguality can serve as a queer middle space indeed.

Queer Latina/os simultaneously endure hardship at the hands of the *gringo* and the Latina/o *familia*. I can attest to such a predicament. Our families force us to stay in the closet of fear and shame because we are obligated to follow the traditional boundaries of *machismo* and *marianismo* all while Anglo Americans do not understand our commitment to our families. The U.S. LGBT community encourages us gay Latina/os to come out of our closets claiming we live a lie and asking how one can lie to their family. U.S. queer Anglos do not always understand that sometimes our lying and remaining in the closet is not seen as ethically wrong in the eyes of our family nor ourselves. Just as queer couples in general have different "covenants" whereby they set their own rules and parameters of their relationship, queer Latina/os sometimes operate under an understood "identity" and/or covenant with their families, a sort of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"

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<sup>32</sup>Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, "Notes from Losaida: A Foreword" in *Velvet Barrios: Popular Culture & Chicana/o Sexualities*, ed. Alicia Gaspar De Alba (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), xvii.

philosophy.<sup>33</sup> Since a “gay” identity is more an object of the context and not the self, many Latina/o families would rather have a closeted gay son who lies to them about his homosexuality than to have an openly gay son who brings shame to the family, as was the case with my family.<sup>34</sup> In the same manner, queer Latina/os understand the need to keep quiet about their sexuality as to not compromise our fidelity to the wider Latina/o resistance in *la lucha*; in essence, how one “performs” determines if one is an outsider or insider within the Latina/o community.<sup>35</sup>

Once again, such dynamics create a queer middle space for GBT Latina/os. We are forced to stay within our closets, or risk having the freedom to choose between the two communities in which we live.<sup>36</sup> *Mestizaje* has affected us, but not in the positive light Elizondo theorizes. On the contrary, it may be that we are interpreting *mestizaje* in terms of forced assimilation. Manuel Mejido argues that “assimilation is the conscious or unconscious losing sight of ...the fragmentation as what constitutes U.S. Hispanic reality.”<sup>37</sup> *Mestizaje*, as impacted on queer Latina/o reality, attempts to blur the struggles

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<sup>33</sup>Juana Maria Rodriguez, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 29.

<sup>34</sup>Rodriguez, *Queer Latinidad*, 28.

<sup>35</sup>Rodriguez, *Queer Latinidad*, 41.

<sup>36</sup>Manuel Ortiz, *The Hispanic Challenge* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 95.

<sup>37</sup>Manuel Mejido, “The Fundamental Problematic of U.S. Hispanic Theology,” in *New Horizons in Hispanic/Latino(a) Theology*, ed. Benjamin Valentin (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 177.

of our daily existence. In essence, *lo cotidiano* of queer Latina/os seems to be minimized, at least such is the impact thus far. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz quotes Daniel Levine when describing *lo cotidiano* as having to do with “particular forms of speech, the experience of class and gender distinctions, the impact of work and poverty on routines and expectations, relations within families and among friends and neighbors in a community, the experience of authority, and central expressions of faith...”<sup>38</sup> For queer Latina/os, *lo cotidiano* is about navigating through the uncomfortable middle spaces that Isasi-Diaz lists. The daily lived experience of queer Latina/os is about negotiating bilinguality, gender dynamics and gender performance, *machismo* and *marianismo*, covenants with family, allegiances with country, and relying on the faith of our traditions. Again, such a neglect of *lo cotidiano* contributes to an uncomfortable queer middle space for LGBT Latina/os.

*Lo cotidiano* cannot be minimized in any way for queer Latina/os, as our daily struggles are what keeps us energized in our *lucha*. Though *lo cotidiano* is an emphasis mainly used by feminists and *mujeristas* in their effort to highlight the wisdom obtained through the everyday experience, a reappropriation of *lo cotidiano* is needed that encompasses the everyday experiences of gay Latinos. Just as Latinas theologize by doing much of the household work such as cooking and cleaning and are responsible for the handing down of our Hispanic traditions, queer Latina/os also hold an accumulated wisdom from an experience that has been lived and known by the community.<sup>39</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>38</sup>Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 66.

in the midst of being closeted, queer Latina/os are able to survive through *lo cotidiano*. For queer Latina/os who endure the threats of cultural assimilation, “the preservation and enrichment of one’s language, a positive attitude towards one’s racial makeup, and the valuing of one’s customs and traditions” becomes an act of holding true to our middle space, even in midst of the pain and confusion in which we find ourselves.<sup>40</sup>

### ***Nepantla: Redeeming the Middle Space***

Holding true to one’s middle space is not an easy thing to embrace. When native Mesoamericans found themselves being colonized in the conquest of the Americas in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they described their situation as being in *nepantla*, a Nahuatl<sup>41</sup> term meaning in the middle, or the middle place. The largest indigenous cultural group in what is today Central Mexico in the 1500s, the Nahuas, spoke Nahuatl, a language still spoken today in many parts of Mexico.<sup>42</sup> *Nepantla* was first described in an account of a priest reprimanding an Indigenous native for still engaging in indigenous practices. Medina quotes Dominican friar Diego Duran’s account:

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<sup>39</sup>Justo Gonzalez, “Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Imagination: A Redefinition,” in *The Ties that Bind: African American and Hispanic American/Latino/a Theologies in Dialogue*, eds. Anthony Pinn and Benjamin Valentin (New York: Continuum, 2001), 68.

<sup>40</sup>Ismael Garcia, “Ethics,” in *Handbook of Latina/o Theologies*, eds. Edwin David Aponte and Miguel De La Torre (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 84.

<sup>41</sup>I use *Nahuatl*, *Nahuat*, and *Nahua* interchangeably.

<sup>42</sup>Lara Medina, “Nepantla Spirituality: Negotiating multiple Religious Identities among U.S. Latinas” in *Rethinking Latino(a) Religion and Identity*, eds. Gaston Espinosa and Miguel De La Torre (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 249.

“Once I questioned an Indian regarding certain things, particularly why he had gone dragging himself about, gathering monies, with bad nights and worse days, and having gathered so much money through so much trouble he put on a wedding and invited the entire town and spent everything. This reprimanding him for the evil thing that he had done, he answered me: Father, do not be frightened because we are still *nepantla*, and since I understood what he meant to say by that phrase and metaphor, which means to be in the middle, I insisted that he tell me in what middle it was in which they found themselves. He told me that since they were still not well rooted in the faith, I should not be surprised that they were still neutral, that they neither answered to one faith or the other, or better said, that they believed in God and at the same time keep their ancient customs and demonic rites. And this is what is meant by his abominable excuse that they still remained in the middle and were neutral.”<sup>43</sup>

In the account, the priest is angry that the native would actively participate in an indigenous community gathering that maintained ties to ancient customs (including religious) while also professing to be a part of the Christian community. The assumption is that one cannot be a part of indigenous religious customs while professing to believe in a Christian god. Such multiple obligations only blurred the lines of a new Christian religion, so priests actively pursued ways to destroy the customs of the indigenous world. In the account, one can hear the confusing place the native finds himself—not wanting to choose either/or but wanting to be in the middle of both arenas—his indigenous and Christian worldview and communities.<sup>44</sup> Medina sees the native as not choosing sides because for him/her, the indigenous and the Christian can exist in harmony, in a middle space, a neutral space where one does not have power of the other.<sup>45</sup> It is in this context

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<sup>43</sup>Diego Duran, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva Espana y Islas de Tierra Firme*, quoted by Lara Medina in *Rethinking Latino(a) Religion and Identity*, eds. Gaston Espinosa and Miguel De La Torre (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 251.

<sup>44</sup>Medina, 253.

<sup>45</sup>Medina, 253.

where we see *nepantla* as a middle space not for confusion, but rather for clarity in understanding and negotiating multiple identities. *Nepantla* is a space for self-determination and agency.<sup>46</sup> For queer Latina/os, the tensions dealt with in our daily lived experiences need not confuse or limit life, but rather be embraced as a launching pad from which we can navigate freely and with clarity. Even with regard to our sexuality, we need not choose one allegiance to our families and another to the U.S. all the while treading with fear. We can, instead, embrace hybridity not as a reality of racial dynamics, but rather of ontology and metaphysical spirituality.<sup>47</sup> Doing so not only relieves the pressures of having to choose family/country allegiances and categorized sexualities or fixed gender roles, but renders the middle space as space to be celebrated.

Medina's use of *nepantla* is part of a larger endeavor to redeem indigenous epistemologies for the spiritualities of U.S. Latinas. She argues that such a reclamation of indigenous understandings can contribute greatly to a hopeful and healthy identity of marginalized folks today.<sup>48</sup> Not only do I agree with her, but I argue that indigenous epistemologies, especially the concept of *nepantla*, create a better paradigm for theological reflection and biblical reflection. Whereas *mestizaje* is rooted in the messy dynamics of racial constructs, the colonization of indigenous peoples, and is limited in its neglect of *lo cotidiano*, *nepantla* is a concept rooted in pre-conquest indigenous understandings. Of course, *nepantla* will never avoid the messiness of history going

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<sup>46</sup>Medina, 254.

<sup>47</sup>Medina, 257.

<sup>48</sup>Medina, 257.

forward, but at least it was not born in a traumatized colonization of the New World. I believe by removing the trauma, hope and agency are restored.

From my experience, *nepantla* is much better able to encompass the middle space dynamics in which queer Latina/os live. In the midst of our struggles against homophobia, we have a way of being in *nepantla* that allows us to exercise our agency without fear of accusations of not being faithful to our respective communities. In *Nepantla*, we can come out of our closets or choose to publicly/privately negotiate how we self-identify. In either case, the choice is ours without shame or guilt. *Nepantla* is not artificially removed from the mess of the daily queer Latina/o reality, but rather a way of being and living in such a reality. *Nepantla* is liberating not because it is another name for hybridity, but because it is specific to the indigenous roots of *Latinidad*. A hermeneutics of *nepantla* offers, in my opinion, the best vantage point to not only constructively negotiate a queer Latina/o identity, but to be affirmed in such an identity also. In *nepantla*, we choose whether to include foreign cultural concepts or exclude oppressive familial expectations, and in doing so we are able to live fuller lives.<sup>49</sup> *Nepantla* enables agency by removing the trauma thus allowing liberating hope to operate.

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<sup>49</sup>Medina, 266.



## CHAPTER 2

### NEPANTLA: QUEER RECLAMATION OF THE INDIGENOUS

*“True reconciliation between the Indigenous and the Christian requires the privileging of the mother culture, the Indigenous, until the Indigenous can be fully respected.”*

-Lara Medina

If *nepantla* offers a suitable way to describe the queer Latina/o experience, it would be helpful to ask how sexual “others” negotiated and lived in their own middle space in the midst of their indigenous cultures before the conquest of the Americas. Answers to such a question do not come easily. In fact, there is not one specific resource that documents a homosexual experience in the Americas before the conquest. Of course, the problem is exacerbated when we take into account how early Christian missionaries and colonizers wished to portray indigenous peoples in the most unflattering ways:

“On the mainland, they eat human flesh. They are more given to sodomy than any other nation. There is no justice among them. They go naked. They have no respect for either love or virginity. They are stupid and silly...They are brutal...I may therefore affirm that God has never created a race more full of vice and composed without the least mixture of kindness or culture...The Indians are more stupid than asses, and refuse to improve in anything.”<sup>50</sup>

Bias was rampant in the New World with a clear purpose in portraying natives as savages who deserve to be colonized and Christianized. Famed defender of indigenous natives, Bartolome de Las Casas, regularly disputed the blatant exaggerated reports of rampant sodomy practiced by the natives. To be clear, he does not say that sodomy was not

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<sup>50</sup>Tzvetan Todorov. *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. by Richard Howard. New York: Harper & Row, 1984. Recounting the eyewitness accounts of indigenous folks in the Americas during the conquest, the bias against the natives is clear in the explicit hyperbole and exaggeration.

practiced, but that sodomy should not be characterized as being no more rampant than in other parts of the Christian world.<sup>51</sup>

Given such bias, is it even possible to understand the middle space that sexual “others” held in indigenous cultures before the conquest? Why even attempt to seek answers to our questions? Is the ambiguity of a *nepantla* hermeneutic not enough? I believe it is not enough to name *nepantla*, but to actually situate it in the lived experience, *lo cotidiano*, of indigenous sexual minorities. From a queer Latina/o perspective, being able to recount the middle space experiences of indigenous folks pre-conquest gives hope to queer Latina/os today. But such hope can only come about if we are aware of the middle spaces of others.

Reminding Latino/as of our history, cultural and religious, gives us meaning and allows us to make meaning ourselves. As Rodriguez states, “How we remember past events has a profound impact on what we do and how we will live.”<sup>52</sup> People carry memories; traditions and rituals carry memories; cultures carry memories, too. Just as the Eucharist serves as a remembrance in many liturgical Christian traditions, recalling the promise of the good news Jesus made to his followers, our traditions pass on memories that serve as important narratives in our lives. The power of cultural memory “rests in the conscious decision to choose particular memories and to give those memories

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<sup>51</sup>Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World: Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice* (London: Routledge, 2000), 169.

<sup>52</sup>Jeanette Rodriguez and Ted Fortier, *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith, and Identity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 7.

precedence.”<sup>53</sup> Within *latinidad*, the Virgin of Guadalupe holds a special cultural memory of hope and affirmation for *mestizo* people. The Day of the Dead<sup>54</sup> ritual also holds a special cultural memory for our ancestors and indigenous family members. What if we were to somehow intentionally expand the cultural memory of queer Latina/os to include memories of indigenous queer folk negotiating *nepantla*, or middle space? Of course, some memories of indigenous queer folk maybe evoke more traumatic reminders of oppression, but the potential for obtaining a fuller and more informed picture of a queer indigenous experience will undoubtedly serve to bring hope to queer Latina/o people today. If all telling and retelling of our cultural past are meant to reclaim the greatness<sup>55</sup> of the past, then why not intentionally attempt to reclaim queer Latina/o indigenous past? Reclamation begins with the uncovering of the stories and symbols of queer indigenous folk.

As mentioned earlier, the colonial encounter between Spanish conquistadores and Mesoamerican natives is considered the birth of the *mestizo* people. *Mestizaje* as a theological concept and hermeneutical principle has been offered theologically by Virgilio Elizondo, and reflected upon in queer fashion in Gloria Anzaldua’s *una*

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<sup>53</sup>Rodriguez, 12.

<sup>54</sup>Day of the Dead, or *Dia de los Muertos*, is a Mexican Indigenous/ Chicano tradition of honoring and communing with the dead—our ancestors. See Medina, 254.

<sup>55</sup>The term “greatness” is meant to imply the totality of a queer indigenous cultural past. As opposed to simply remembering the traumatic experiences, the “greatness” of the past implies overcoming the traumatic experiences of the past.

*conciencia de la mestiza*.<sup>56</sup> Alongside the paradigm of *mestizaje* is that of *nepantla*, based on the Nahuatl term meaning “in the middle.”<sup>57</sup> Used to describe their experience in midst of Christian oppression, indigenous peoples referred to themselves as being in *nepantla*. As we begin to expand our cultural memory of queer indigenous folks, we must highlight queer cosmological concepts and constructions of sexuality from our indigenous past in order to frame queer middle space anew. Thus, using *nepantla* as a hermeneutic, I will now briefly explain how homosexuality and sexual minorities occupied a middle space in Mesoamerican indigenous cultures, especially in the context of colonial Latin America.

### **The Tensions of a Queer Middle Space in Indigenous Mesoamerica**

A quick glance at dictionaries and Mesoamerican encyclopedias leads to very few answers in uncovering notions of sexuality in indigenous cultures. Alfredo Lopez Austin in *Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas* mentions that homosexuality was punished among some groups in Mesoamerica but tolerated by others and that sexuality in the Mesoamerican indigenous view was something to be held on an equilibrium, something to be balanced.<sup>58</sup> He has little else to say on the subject, but as I

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<sup>56</sup>Jose Vasconcelos offers in 1961 a problematic theoretical construct called a “mestiza” or “cosmic” race in which the continual mixture of human races results in a new race. Both Anzaldua and Elizondo successfully attempt to redeem the concept of *mestizaje*. See Jose Vasconcelos, *La Raza Cosmica: Mision de la Raza Iber-Americana* (Mexico: Aguilar S.A., 1961).

<sup>57</sup>Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Endangered Cultures* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1990), 10.

<sup>58</sup>Alfredo Lopez Austin, “Homosexuality,” in *Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), 300.

began to dig deeper, I came in contact with a plethora of resources on sex and sexuality in Mesoamerica. It is quite amazing what one can find when one knows what to look for through research! The more I thought about where queer sexual activity would be taking place today (e.g. bathhouses, religious arenas, military and carnival celebrations), the more I found possibilities for queer sexual activity in Mesoamerican indigenous society (e.g. bathhouses, temples, warrior festivals). Before talking about specific examples of sex among humans, a good place to start would be aspects of sexual/gender constructs among the Divine in Mesoamerican cosmology.



Figure 1. Tezcatlipoca, a Nahua God,  
from the *Florentine Codex*

Tezcatlipoca (Figure 1), a powerful god in the Nahua universe, is portrayed with a sword and shield, and is represented as a warrior god who breathes masculinity. He seems very masculine in the Florentine Codex<sup>59</sup> until one notices Friar Bernardino de Sahagún's description of Tezcatlipoca as a *puto*. Unlike our modern association of the Spanish word *puto* with "whore," we do not actually know why Sahagun calls this divinity a *puto*. Cecelia Klein argues for the fundamental bisexuality of Tezcatlipoca<sup>60</sup> and Pete Sigal acknowledges the god's "androgynous" beauty portrayed in various rituals, but the classification of *puto* may be more about Sahagun's bias than anything else.

We know for sure that Tezcatlipoca had multiple identities, and one of his identities is Titlacauan, a god classified as a *cuiloni*. *Cuiloni* refers specifically "to a person taken from behind by another, suggesting that the term was quite specific to the act of anal intercourse and effeminacy."<sup>61</sup> Thus, in one identity a god is the quintessential warrior while in another identity he is associated as one who is effeminate. In the Florentine Codex, he is constantly depicted with a flower, a symbol for sexual desire and

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<sup>59</sup>The *Florentine Codex* was originally produced by *Mexica* indigenous natives under the supervision of Franciscan Friar, Bernardino de Sahagún. The codex, completed in 1569, depicts the conquest from the *Mexica* perspective, though scholars question the accuracy of the translations by Sahagun. For more information on the *Florentine Codex*, see <http://www.historians.org/tl/lessonplans/ca/fitch/conquestbib.htm>.

<sup>60</sup>Pete Sigal, "Queer Nahuatl: Sahagun's Faggots and Sodomites, Lesbians and Hermaphrodites," in *Sexual Encounters, Sexual Collisions: Alternative Sexualities in Colonial Mesoamerica*. ed. by Neil Whitehead (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 26.

<sup>61</sup>Sigal, 23.

excess.<sup>62</sup> When he is identified as Titlacauan, he is a helper for the other warrior gods, carrying things for them while at the same time seducing them with his sexual prowess. Tezcatlipoca and Titlacauan would seem to be figures easy to remember as we expand our cultural memory of our queer Latina/o indigenous past.

The Maya Moon Goddess is also a figure known for exhibiting blatant bi-eroticism. Sigal writes:

“...the Moon Goddess penetrated Maa society. But the Moon Goddess herself was penetrated in her sexual acts with the gods...The Moon Goddess engaged in sexual acts with both male and female figures...The Moon Goddess was to be both penetrator and penetrated, both active and passive, no matter who her partner was...She was penetrated by both male and female gods and people; she penetrated both male and female gods and people. This was the nature of the Moon Goddess as the most powerful goddess in the pantheon.”<sup>63</sup>

The Moon Goddess’ sexual exploits had no bearing on her identity which is why she is characterized as being bi-erotic, not bisexual by modern scholars. Such eroticism was evident in ritualized texts where the Moon Goddess engages in sexual acts with a female spider that also has a phallus. Sigal concludes that because the Moon Goddess was presented in acts that might be considered lesbian, bestial, and heterosexual, “this presentation of her undermines the very notion of [Maya] identity based on sexual behavior.”<sup>64</sup>

Before Maya views on sexuality began to take a more restrictive transformation in the eighteenth century, Maya warriors celebrated their masculinity by being ritually

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<sup>62</sup>Sigal, 22.

<sup>63</sup>Sigal, 219.

<sup>64</sup>Sigal, 219.

sodomized by their gods. Because of Maya fascination with the hyper-masculinity of their warrior classes, nothing could take away from their status as ultimate penetrator. Through song and dance (where the focal point is in the warrior's body), the leading warriors had no issue being ritually sodomized as others tried to penetrate them because to be ritually sodomized was to prove one's masculinity.<sup>65</sup> And when a warrior was actually killed by way of sacrifice, his body was rubbed in oils and celebrated as a masculine hero who was about to be penetrated (killed) by the gods. As Sigal notes, "the sacrifice of one's own blood showed that the warrior was willing to be the feminine partner to the masculine gods, and at the same time assert his own masculine power."<sup>66</sup>



Figure 2. Flower Bearing Prostitute, from the *Florentine Codex*

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<sup>65</sup>Pete Sigal, *From Moon Goddesses to Virgins: The Colonization of Yucatecan Maya Sexual Desire* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 135.

<sup>66</sup>Sigal, 135.



The Nahua flower bearer in the *Florentine Codex* can be seen as a woman prostitute (Figure 2), representing the goddess of fertility and sexual excess, Xochiquetzal or “Quetzal Flower.” Flowers are included on her garments as well, pointing to the sexual seduction that she represents.

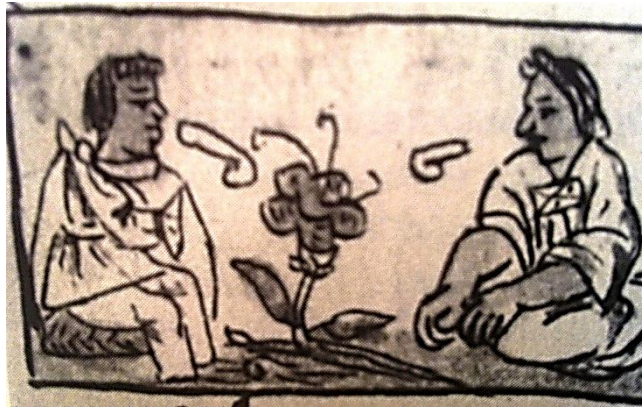


Figure 3. The Xochihua, a cross-dresser, from the *Florentine Codex*

A flower is also in the center of an image representing the Xochihua, the cross-dresser (Figure 3).<sup>67</sup> At first glance, the image looks as if a man and a woman are seated around a flower, but the text describing the image in the *Florentine Codex* specifically describes the two figures as males.<sup>68</sup> The woman is the Xochihua, a cross-dresser.

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<sup>67</sup>Sigal, “Queer,” 22.

<sup>68</sup>Sigal, “Queer,” 22.

Xochihua were tolerated in society, especially among the nobles where cross-dressers play a more institutionalized role. Sigal summarizes:

“...the evidence shows that many high-level nobles kept Xochihuas as dependents. They used them to perform household chores, to clean the temples, and to accompany warriors to war. When at war, the Xochihuas provided the warriors with a variety of services, including sex. At other times, the Xochihuas, some of whom were housed in temples, were available for sexual favors and other chores to priests and other members of the high nobility.”<sup>69</sup>

Though the Xochihuas were not always looked favorably upon, the fact that they held such a visible presence in temples and among nobles speaks volumes to the middle space they held. Questions remain as to whether Xochihuas were born into such servitude or did they choose such a path willingly.

Lest we think only queer males were visible in society, the *Florentine Codex* also shows women who enjoy the company of other women, the *patlache*. Shown visibly in the codex with sexually suggestive bare breasts, the *patlache* were unfortunately considered by Europeans to be hermaphrodite figures even though they are not ambiguously gendered in the codex. The queer middle space occupied by these “lesbian” women seemed too much for European men who apparently could not envision “real” women acting in such a manner<sup>70</sup> (enjoying the company of other women).<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>Sigal, “Queer,” 23.

<sup>70</sup>Indigenous women were not the only ones crossing gender boundaries. A Spanish nun Catalina de Frauso was said to be a “virtuous woman” and a proven virgin who was granted a royal license to wear men’s clothing (soldier garb) in the sixteenth century. See Laura A. Lewis, “From Sodomy to Superstition: The Active Pathic and Bodily Transgressions in New Spain” in *Sexual Encounters, Sexual Collisions: Alternative Sexualities in Colonial Mesoamerica* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 141.



Figure 4. Temazcal, a Nahua Bathhouse from the *Florentine Codex*

Just as bathhouses have provided opportunities for same-sex encounters today, Nahua bathhouses, known as *temazcal* (Figure 4), also provided opportunities for illicit sexual conduct among indigenous sexual minorities. In the sixteenth century, the Spanish became increasingly uncomfortable with the *temazcal* because of the rash of reports of sexual acts between men and women and men with men.<sup>72</sup> The *temazcal* was supposed to

<sup>71</sup>Sigal, "Queer," 26.

<sup>72</sup>Zeb Tortorici, "Heran Todos Putos": Sodomitical Subcultures and Disordered Desire in Early Colonial Mexico" in *Sexual Encounters, Sexual Collisions: Alternative Sexualities in Colonial Mesoamerica*. ed. by Neil Whitehead (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 54.

be a place of ritual cleaning. Sick folks would visit the bathhouse to experience the hot bath water for its healing properties. Others imbibed alcohol while relaxing in the baths and still others found ways to have sexual relations with both men and women. The combination of anal sex, and sex in general, in a place of ritual healing created a liminal space in the minds of the Spanish.<sup>73</sup> Cleanliness and “pollution” were not supposed to be in the same place, but those who participated in the bathhouse activities did not seem to be bothered with such a middle (liminal) space. That is, until word of explicit queer sexual networks were uncovered in the Michoacan region in a 1604 sodomy case.

In August of the same year, two indigenous men were caught having anal sex in the *temazcal*. As the authorities investigated, it became pretty evident that the men had no qualms talking about what they were doing. One would think that if queer encounters were so taboo in indigenous society, defendants would not talk as openly as the culprits did in this case. What was especially revealing was the intimacy the men described, including kissing, hugging, and even cuddling in the *temazcal*!<sup>74</sup> After first describing this as a first time incident, one of the accused then admitted to having multiple sex partners at the bathhouses in the area. Furthermore, one of the accused began naming all of his sex partners, from assistants to local government officials to bakers and students in religious communities. While some of the men had wives, others did not. One of the accused, Quini, accused a local baker of providing a “safe house” for men interested in

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<sup>73</sup>Tortorici, 53.

<sup>74</sup>Tortorici, 37.

meeting other men for any sexual rendezvous.<sup>75</sup> Though I use the term “safe house,” one must wonder how such clandestine queer sexual networks operated without anyone knowing—local officials, wives, others? Surely, people knew and turned a blind eye to what was apparently a regular phenomenon around the area. Tortorici mentions Gruzinski in Gruzinski’s conclusions about same sex activity up to the 17<sup>th</sup> century in colonial Latin America:

“(1) that urban networks of men who sought out other men for sexual relationships did exist in the colonial period ; (2) that these men did not live in fear, despite occasional yet harsh repression by the church; and (3) that these men’s activities operated at the threshold of social and religious tolerance...that there was often a tacit acceptance of this behavior so long as it was kept private and secret.”<sup>76</sup>

From one sodomy case in 1604, the evidence is pretty clear that queer middle spaces were utilized not only in urban areas but also in rural areas.

Even more astounding is the paradigm shift away from thinking of same sex acts as being defined by who is the passive and active partner. In the accounts uncovered in the 1604 case, passive bottom boys were the ones who were initiating sexual contact as opposed to the aggressive active partners always initiating contact. It seems to be the case that in Nahua culture sexuality was more about performance than core identity, and it operated outside of the more traditional active/passive paradigm.<sup>77</sup> When the elements of

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<sup>75</sup>Tortorici, 43.

<sup>76</sup>Tortorici, 51.

<sup>77</sup>Kimberly Gauderman, “It Happened on the Way to the Temascal and Other Stories: Desiring the Illicit in Colonial Spanish America” in *Sexual Encounters, Sexual Collisions: Alternative Sexualities in Colonial Mesoamerica*. ed. by Neil Whitehead (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 179.

intimacy are added, one begins to wonder how deep these same gender relationships were. Such same gender relationships do not seem too farfetched from what we encounter in relational dynamics in queer communities today.

A *nepantla* hermeneutic, with an eye for the middle space, seems to be working quite well as we reclaim significant cultural memories of our queer indigenous past.<sup>78</sup>

The expanding of queer cultural memory by reaching back to our indigenous past can only serve to help queer Latina/os live in our present day middle spaces and struggles. As Rodriguez concludes:

“To put it succinctly, cultural memory continues to exist because it feeds a basic need for identity, salvation, hope, and resistance to annihilation. The cultural memory exists because there is a need for it. The story speaks of the restoration of human dignity in a voice once silenced and now restored. It speaks of the restoration of a lost language and a way of perceiving the divine. It speaks of accessing lost symbols and transforming them in a new time. Ultimately, it speaks and continues to speak of a shared experience of a people—a people who suffer.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>There are a plethora of other instances of queer middle spaces in indigenous society including carnival festivals where men dress and dance as women, ritual celebrations where same sex activity is initiated in celebration of the gods, and confessors hearing anal intercourse (hetero and homo) as the most commonly confessed sin. See Whitehead, Sigal, and Wiesner for more examples.

<sup>79</sup> Rodriguez, 23.

**CHAPTER 3**  
**USING NEPANTLA TO QUEER THE BIBLE:**  
**A TEX(T)-MEX READING OF THE SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN**

*“From there Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ But she answered him, ‘Sir,\* even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.”*

*-Mark 7:24-30*

Before offering elements and criteria for biblical reading strategies (chapter four), I will now offer an example of using my own location within *nepantla*, in reading scripture. With a liberation praxis in mind, I am doing first and then reflecting. You will notice that elements of my own social location are revealed in the middle, *nepantla*, of the analysis of the text.

Utilizing a lens of liberation and with a *nepantla* hermeneutic in mind, the present chapter retells the story of the Syrophoenician Woman found in Mark 7:24-30 from the perspective of a young, gay Chicano. First, I highlight the factors that contribute to the Syrophoenician’s status as an “other” and make comparisons to my own middle space and cultural experience of being a gay Chicano. Then, I will produce a fictional narrative from the perspective of the “other” in the text, taking into consideration the highlighted factors, indigenous/cultural dynamics and other autobiographical elements. Such a retelling is not meant to be an authoritative rendering with regards to the LGBT community or the Latino/a community, but rather a subjective analysis and composition that contributes to the larger field of emerging biblical reading strategies for all oppressed

peoples. By holding *nepantla*, a queer middle space between the biblical text, my own cultural experience, and my indigenous cultural memory, I am hoping my queer Latino perspective will resonate with other queer Latina/os.

### Scripture Analysis

It is not hard to decipher that the Syrophoenician woman is an “other” in Mark’s portrayal of her, but how is she deemed as “other?” Larry Wills notes that throughout scripture, certain peoples are categorized in many ways, whether implicitly or explicitly, as “other.” One notable way is being mythologized as an external “other,” that is one who is perceived as the opposite of all that we are. Opposite the external “other” is the internal “other,” that is one who lives among us often as invisible but always capable of colluding with the external “other.”<sup>80</sup> Is the Syrophoenician an external “other” or internal “other?” Can Jesus be classified as an “other?”

Mark’s account begins with Jesus retreating to the region of Tyre for the first time, although from 3.8 we know that Jesus is already known in the area. Word has spread beyond the borders of the areas Jesus has visited, and, apparently not even he knows the extent of his fame. Why Tyre? The city of Tyre was a center of trade and political influence in the first millennium BCE, and the region included the surrounding

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<sup>80</sup>Lawrence M. Wills, *Not God’s People: Insiders and Outsiders in the Biblical World* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 13. Wills argues that the bible texts construct a vision of the Other, and he also describes how the texts construct the Other and why.



farmlands and villages near the Galilean border.<sup>81</sup> It has been suggested by Ringe that the city of Tyre itself was mainly a Gentile area while the surrounding areas were inhabited by Jews.<sup>82</sup>

We are told Jesus entered a house and wished to keep his anonymity, but if he still remained in the borderland area where many Jews resided, it is no wonder why he could not keep his presence secret! The area would have been abuzz with the news of a Jewish peasant folk healer who is making an appearance in the region of Tyre. (Every time my uncle, a *curandero*<sup>83</sup> or folk healer, comes to town, the whole neighborhood seems to know before I do!) Just as any news surrounding healers, heroes, and drug smugglers along the U.S.-Mexican borderland region makes headlines today, word of Jesus would have made its way into the city and areas farther north. Is Jesus a milder first century version of Pancho Villa or Joaquin Murieta?<sup>84</sup> His presence and legendary character

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<sup>81</sup>Sharon H. Ringe, "A Gentile Woman's Story, Revisited: rereading Mark 7.24-31a," in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 84.

<sup>82</sup>Ringe, *Mark*, 85.

<sup>83</sup>*Curanderismo* has its roots in traditional Mesoamerican healing practices, incorporating concepts of Western medicine. For a good introduction to the practices of *curanderas/os*, see Elena Avila, *Woman Who Glows in the Dark: A Curandera Reveals Traditional Aztec Secrets of Physical and Spiritual Health* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 1999).

<sup>84</sup>Luis D. Leon, *La Llorona's Children: Religion, Life, and Death in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 52, 76. Murieta was a subversive hero, a Mexican social bandit from the 19<sup>th</sup> century while General Pancho Villa became a hero in the Mexican Revolution between 1910 and 1917.

certainly seem to compare, at least in fame. In any case, we can clearly see that Jesus is an outsider and has entered a borderland liminal space that was not his hometown.<sup>85</sup>

Mark tells us that the woman was a Gentile of Syrophoenician origin, meaning a Phoenician from Syria farther north. Though she is portrayed in cultural/religious and national/political categories as Sugirtharajah notes, is she an external or internal “other?”<sup>86</sup> Nelavala claims that “although the woman is labeled as an outsider, in fact she is the insider in her own territory.”<sup>87</sup> Even though Nelavala is technically correct, I disagree with the woman’s status as an “insider.” The Syrophoenician’s roots are nowhere near where she meets Jesus. The borderland area where she encounters him may be just as foreign to her as it is to Jesus. Is it possible that she is an internal “other” within her own society?

The Syrophoenician woman might not have crossed a national border, but she and Jesus are both caught in a borderland liminal space, not unlike the social situation of many Chicana/os and queer folk today. Both groups deal with marginality. Chicana/os are caught up in the liminal space between a Mexican heritage and a U.S. postcolonial identity. As mentioned earlier, Chicana/os must be more Mexican than the Mexicans and more American than the Americans without losing respect from either group. Queer folk

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<sup>85</sup>Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands: La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 102. As a *mestiza*, a lesbian Latina, Anzaldua has no homeland and constantly flounders in uncharted seas and borderlands.

<sup>86</sup>R.S. Sugirtharajah, “The Syrophoenician Woman,” *The Expository Times* 98 (1986), 14.

<sup>87</sup>Surekha Nelavala, “Smart Syrophoenician Woman: A Dalit Feminist Reading of Mark 7:24-31,” *The Expository Times* 118:2 (2006), 68.

are caught up in the liminal space of a transgressive sexuality and sexual identity. In our postcolonial context, many straight Chicana/os choose to believe that homosexuality is a largely modern and Anglo-North American idea that has invaded the cultures of less industrialized nations and third world countries, including Latin America, and argue that western culture is penetrating Latino culture with American products and ideas, evident with certain clothing retailers and food chains. They also include gay culture in the list of American exports. Mexico City regularly celebrates gay pride along with many other Latin American cities, and many Latinos respond by blaming America for negatively influencing their culture. The same holds true for many Latina/os in the U.S. Some Chicana/os in my family view resisting homosexuality as a necessity because it is a threat to our Chicana/o culture, especially with regard to family structure and what is known as *machismo*. Masculinity is privileged in the concept of *machismo*, so homosexuality is consequently seen to be at odds with a Chicano identity. The idea of a gay Chicano is invading and unacceptable. LGBT folks and Chicana/os are caught up in marginality, so what happens when both marginal groups eventually meet in a borderlands liminal space? The encounter between Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman offers some insight.

The woman begged Jesus to cast a demon out of her daughter and he responds with, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and feed it to the dogs.”<sup>88</sup> The harshness of his response can hardly be softened. Malina calls Jesus’s use of the word “dog” a strong insult in the Ancient Near Eastern world, especially since

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<sup>88</sup>All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise noted.

dogs were considered unclean scavengers who invaded homes looking for any scraps to appropriate. Even more disconcerting is the way Jesus views her and more so, her daughter, as illegitimate and unworthy to receive benefits meant for Jews.<sup>89</sup> Her and, more so her daughter, are to be excluded from receiving such “food,” but are there wider factors at play in the story, particularly related to the dynamics of “domination and subordination in a colonized setting?”<sup>90</sup>

Ringe highlights how the borderlands region where Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman meet was an ethnically mixed region with not only suspicions between city dwellers and village residents, but also economic tension between the “wealthier urban trading centers and the poor farming communities.”<sup>91</sup> When food was scarce, especially in times of poor harvests, borderland Galilean peasants and farmers would be forced to forego the benefit of not going hungry in order to meet the needs of city trading centers, like the city of Tyre. It is not hard to see the colonial entanglements within this text.<sup>92</sup> Borderland Jewish Galilean peasants would do all the work and Tyrians would reap all the benefits. Such a dynamic compounded with the cultural, ethnic, and religious tensions

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<sup>89</sup>David M. Rhoads, “Jesus and the Syrophoenician Woman in Mark : A Narrative-Critical Study,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 62:2 (1994), 354.

<sup>90</sup>Aruna Gnanadason, “Jesus and the Asian Woman: A Post-Colonial Look at the Syro-Phoenician Woman/Canaanite Woman from an Indian Perspective,” *Studies in World Christianity* 7:2 (2001), 163.

<sup>91</sup>Ringe, *Mark*, 84.

<sup>92</sup>Kwok Pui-Lan, “Making the Connections: Postcolonial Studies and Feminist Biblical Interpretation” in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 46.

reflected the larger context of Roman-occupied Palestine.<sup>93</sup> Surely the Galilean peasant and *curandero* Jesus would interpret the woman to be like her fellow Syrophoenicians, trying to reap a benefit for which she did not work. Any *curandero* would try to heal the social illness of economic injustice as well as physical ailments. Also, the dynamics of the situation almost sound like the recent debates on immigration reform in the U.S. where undocumented immigrants are demonized as “other” even though they work the fields producing a harvest from which U.S. citizens benefit.

Trusting that the stories of Jesus as a *curandero*, or folk healer, are true, the Syrophoenician counters Jesus’s prejudice<sup>94</sup> with a demanding riddle of her own—“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Skinner notes that for the woman, a small morsel (a crumb) is all her daughter needs to be healed,<sup>95</sup> but I wonder if the woman’s response should be read more as a direct questioning of the validity of Jesus’s argument. If Jesus says that food for children should not be given to dogs, what if the woman’s response is more in the sense of...“Sir, how dare you say such a thing? Even dogs get to eat the crumbs!?” This understanding of the tone of their dialogue is supported by Jesus’s abrupt recognition of his prejudice and the woman’s rightful indignation. In Mark, Jesus says it was because of what she said that the demon has left her daughter as opposed to Matthew where Jesus recognizes the Canaanite woman’s

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<sup>93</sup>Ringe, *Mark*, 85.

<sup>94</sup>Not even *curanderos/as* are immune from dealing with their own prejudices. See my narrative below.

<sup>95</sup>Matthew L. Skinner, “‘She Departed to Her House’: Another Dimension of the Syrophoenician Mother’s Faith in Mark 7:24-30,” *Word & World* 26 (2006): 18.

faith. The irony in Mark's portrayal is that a few verses earlier in 7.15, Jesus teaches, "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." Jesus recognized that by treating the Syrophoenician as an excluded "other" and calling her an insulting name, he was defiling both of them. By contrast, the Syrophoenician corrects Jesus and so builds him up. She takes advantage of their borderland liminal space encounter and helps Jesus to see that they both are, in all likelihood, more similar than what they have perceived. As Ranjini W. Rebera says, "The ability of the Syrophoenician woman to rise above discriminatory practices to claim her right to inclusion within the circle of those, whose lives touched Jesus, is a significant one."<sup>96</sup>

Two themes emanating from the story ending are radical inclusivity and familism. Radical inclusivity has been universally attributed to the texts in Matthew and Mark by both queer and non-queer scholars.<sup>97</sup> Familism is a central aspect of Latino/a culture where not only family life is valued, but also the interpersonal relations among family members.<sup>98</sup> I am unsure whether the woman and Jesus would have actually considered themselves as family, even in the conclusion of the story, but there is no doubt that after

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<sup>96</sup>Ranjini Wickramaratne Rebera, "The Syrophoenician Woman: A South Asian Feminist Perspective," in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 110.

<sup>97</sup>Thomas, Bohache, "Matthew" in *The Queer Commentary*. Edited by Deryn Guest, Robert Goss, Mona West and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006), 513.

<sup>98</sup>Rafael M. Diaz, *Latino Gay Men and HIV* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 92.

an experience like this one in a borderland liminal space, the two are closer now than when they first encountered each other.

Thus far, I have analyzed Mark's passage of the Syrophoenician woman in 7.24-30, examining how the "other" is understood between Jesus and the Syrophoenician as they both give witness to a middle space between them. Attempts were made to incorporate contemporary comparisons to Chicana/os and queer folk. With the analysis in mind, I will now offer a retelling of the story from my *nepantla*, my social location as a gay Chicano. Although there are some autobiographical elements in the story, it is meant to be a fictional narrative that brings the story of the Syrophoenician woman to our contemporary context. As Musa W. Dube writes, "A story well told is a story well interpreted."<sup>99</sup>

### **A Queer Retelling: *Somos Gay, Somos Latinos, Somos Familia***

"She makes me so frustrated sometimes!" I yelled. The door slammed behind me as I walked into the apartment.

"Sounds, yet again, like you had a good lunch with your mother," Tod sarcastically replied as he sat on the couch watching television.

"I do not understand how after 5 years, she can't accept me for who I am. You would think that she would have made some progress by now."

"Honestly Mike, I seriously don't know why you still talk to her after all the things she's told you. I would have told her to go to hell a long time ago."

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<sup>99</sup>Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 191.

My partner Tod was used to the venting that took place after I visited with my mother. In the 4 years in which we had been together, he mildly understood where I was coming from. I say mildly because his white, middle-class family tolerated him, the youngest of three children, being gay. When he came out to them 4 years ago, his mom and dad freaked out but then came around. He was always close to his mother, and his coming out to her didn't do anything to hurt their relationship. If only I could have experienced the same thing. Nope. Not me. My relationship with my mother sucked. We used to be so close, but not after telling her about my desire for other men. When I came out to my mother, I saw a side of her I never saw before. Her yelling scared me. She started crying and couldn't stop. Her tears were never ending. She reminded me of *la llorona*, the story of the weeping woman who drowned her kids and forever cried while looking for them again. I prayed that she wouldn't hurt me, though, seeing her cry was even more torturous for me. I remember her intently looking in my eyes saying, "*No tienes verguenza!* You have no shame! How could you do this to me?!" I could only cry with her then, and it continued the day after. Her tears soon stopped, in front of me at least. Somehow she did begin to deal with the fact that her son, her *mijo*, was gay, but only by me agreeing not to tell anyone else in our family about "my situation," as she would put it. But now, even that was constantly bothering me.

"So what did she say this time?" Tod asked me.

I answered, "Well, I told her how I felt I was living a lie, by not telling my grandparents and the rest of my family that I'm gay. It's been 5 years for goodness sake. I told her I'm getting tired of my uncles asking me if I have a girlfriend or not. She told me



it's none of their business and I don't have to tell them anything. And to top it all off, she threatened to leave town forever!"

"Leave town forever?" Tod asked with a puzzled and curious face.

"She said if anyone in our family ever found out, she would move far away and that no one would ever hear from her again, including me," I said in disbelief. "Can you believe that?"

Without hesitation, Tod said, "Oh, I can believe it. We are talking about Mother Diaz here. She doesn't usually play around with stuff like this."

"I guess you're right. Anyhow, how are you feeling today? Any better?" I inquired of Tod. For about 2 weeks, he had a nonstop headache, couldn't sleep at night and felt fatigued and without any energy. It was the first time something like that had happened to him, especially for such a time period. His doctor told him he was probably just working too hard and needed to rest up. It was weird because Tod never got sick. I could be sick with the flu or a cold for a week or so and he would never catch anything.

"My head is still killing me. I can't sleep. I can't think. It's really starting to make me upset now. I don't understand how I can be tired all of the time. It doesn't make any sense." As Tod expressed his frustration, I was starting to get worried that it was something serious.

"You mean to tell me the doctor can't do anything for you?" I asked and wondered.

“No, Mike,” Tod announced clearly agitated by my questioning. “I told you that he said for me to try and get some rest and then next week if it hasn’t gotten better, go and see him.”

Trying to not get Tod worked up, I replied, “Alright. Take it easy. I’m just asking.” I learned to not bother him too much when he wasn’t feeling well. The simple fact that he was getting agitated, though, seemed to hint that his fatigue was really starting to bother him. I then remembered something else my mother mentioned at lunch.

“Hey Tod, you want me to ask my uncle if he’ll say prayers for you and do a cleansing?”

“Prayers Mike? Cleansing?” Tod questioned my inquiry. “Your family doesn’t even go to church. What are you talking about?”

“Well, apparently my great uncle Chuy<sup>100</sup> is in town visiting.” My uncle Chuy (pronounced like chewy) was from the *campo*, the countryside in south Texas. Growing up, my grandparents and aunts and uncles always called him to ask him questions about their problems. Whether someone was sick or one of my uncles was cheating on his wife, my grandmother always talked to him to see if he could do something to help. He always had a remedy for everything, and it was always on the phone. The man fixed situations and healed people from afar. My family revered him. In fact, I think the only thing that stopped my mother from asking him to try to heal “my situation” is her fear of him finding out I am gay.

“Chuy the witch you used to talk about?”

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<sup>100</sup>In Mexican/Chicano culture, *Chuy* is a nickname for someone named *Jesus*.

“He’s not a witch. He’s a *curandero*, like a folk healer. And I bet he can get rid of whatever you have or at least help. You know my uncles used to get tired and couldn’t sleep and sometimes they would run a fever at night. Many times it was because someone gave them *ojo*.”

“What is that?”

“When someone looks at you with envy or jealousy, you can get *ojo*. Even small babies...I remember when my grandmother used to meet the kids of her good friends, the kids of her *comadres*. She would have to touch the kids, or else they might get *ojo*. Even if someone is simply envious of you, you can get *ojo*. You appear to be sick, but it’s really some type of negative energy. You never know...you might have one.” *Ojo* in various Latino/a cultures is called *mal ojo* or *mal de ojo*, but I grew up just calling it *ojo*. Some people thought only babies could get it, but I grew up with the experience that anyone could get it.

“Well, whatever. I’ll take all the help I can get, seriously. But what are you going to tell him—that you’re boyfriend doesn’t feel well? You’re mother isn’t going to like that idea.” Tod was right. There is no way my mother would go along with me asking Chuy for help. If I talk to him, I’ll have to come out to him, or I could lie and just make up some random story about a friend who needs help...who’s also living with me...blah, blah, blah.

“Yeah, that might not work out,” I concluded.

Later that evening, I got to thinking about Chuy. The last time I saw him had to be almost 15 years ago. He wasn’t always a *curandero*, though. My mother told me he found

his calling when they were growing up together. She used to say that he scared her growing up because whenever they went to see a movie at the movie theatre, he would always know how the movie ended before it ended. Also, it freaked people out that he could read their minds sometimes. One day, he met others like him. When he started practicing *curanderismo*, my family then realized his gifts, and no one was frightened by Chuy anymore. He went from Chuy the outcast to Chuy the revered. I remember I didn't talk to him much, mainly because he didn't speak any English, and growing up I didn't know much Spanish. I've learned Spanish since then though, enough to understand and socially converse, and he was in town visiting now. What if I visited him anyway? What would happen? Of course, I would have to come out to him then, but this is also about Tod. What if he really does have *ojo*?

I then picked up the phone to call my mother.

"*Bueno*," my mother answered.

"Mom."

"What happened *mijo*?"

"I'm going to go see Chuy tonight."

"You're going to see Chuy for what?" she asked.

"Just to say hi. I haven't seen him in forever. And I think someone gave Tod *ojo*."

"*Estás loco*. You're crazy," she anxiously replied. "You better not go or he might find out about you. Besides you don't even know where he's staying."

I responded to her quickly, "He's not staying at grandma's house? Where's he at?"

“I’m not sure because you’re aunt, *Tia Esmeralda*, told me a lot of people were trying to see him so he could help them with different things. I think she said he didn’t want to see big groups of people, so he went to someone else’s house to stay for the night. Apparently, he doesn’t want anyone to know where he is...So you shouldn’t bother him either.”

Surprised and disappointed I said, “You’re kidding me!”

When our conversation ended, I called my grandmother’s house to see if they knew anything about where Chuy was, but no one answered. I decided to go over to my grandmother’s house and to the neighborhood where I grew up. I had to see Chuy.

As I arrived at the *casa de mi abuela*, I noticed my mother’s car was in the driveway. She didn’t tell me she was going over to my grandmother’s. I stepped out of my car and started walking toward the house, but I then heard some noise around the back of the house. I decided to go around back and enter the house there through the back door. After I turned the corner to the backyard of the house, I found a small group of people huddled around the back door. As I approached them, my mother came running out of the house to meet me.

“What are you doing here?” she whispered in an angry tone. “You’re not supposed to be here. Chuy is too busy right now and doesn’t want to see anyone else!”

“I thought you said Chuy wasn’t staying here tonight,” I said with curiosity.

“He’s not. He’s only here for a little while and he’s about to leave in a few minutes once he finishes dealing with everyone. Don’t bother him right now. He’s dealing with people who need him. Go home.”

“I’m not going home until I see Chuy. He can help Tod out, and that’s why I’m here,” I told her.

“Don’t do this now, Michael! I’m telling you to go home,” she warned me.

I immediately began yelling aloud, “Chuy! Donde estás? Where are you at Chuy?” As my mother continued to block my way towards the crowd of people and into the house, I saw a small-framed individual talking with my grandmother’s *comadre* near the door. His silver hair caught my immediate attention, and when I saw his black sunglasses atop his head, I then knew who it was and I yelled at him, “Chuy!” He didn’t hear me so I yelled louder, but it seemed as though he was ignoring me. He wouldn’t do that. Would he? “Chuy!” I yelled again.

He glanced over in my direction. With a small smile on his face, he whispered to himself, “*Mikito*.” At least, that’s what I thought he said. I could only make out what he was saying from a small distance, so I was basically reading his lips. *Mikito* was what he used to call me when I was little. It meant “little Mike” but in a much more endearing fashion. I hadn’t been called that in years.

Before I could say anything, my mother interrupted, “No Chuy. Michael has to go home. Tell him to go home. You’re too busy anyway.” Then she hastily turned to me, worriedly muttering, “Go home Mike. Chuy is too busy.”

Without hesitation, I rushed to Chuy’s side bypassing those individuals who were waiting to see him. “I’m sorry Chuy, but I need your help.” He stared at me for five seconds, and I said it again in Spanish after realizing he didn’t speak English too well. He looked over at my mother who was standing where I left her. She seemed like she wanted

to cry. Then, he looked at me. The lady he was talking to stood there also wondering why I interrupted her conversation or *platica*. She was trying to tell her story to Chuy, but then she stood still, looking at me. In fact, it seemed as if everyone just stood in silence staring at me.

“What’s the matter?” Chuy asked me.

“I think someone might have *ojo*,” I said.

“What do you mean you think someone has *ojo*? *Quien*? Who?” he asked. I didn’t know what to say at that moment. My mother was staring at me along with the other *gente*, the other people in the small crowd. I came there for Tod, but why did I feel like it was more about me?

“My partner, *mi compañero*, someone gave him *ojo*. Can you do something? A cleansing, *limpia*, or something?” I asked him hurriedly.

“Oh your friend has *ojo*? Where is he? *Donde estas tu amigo*?” he naively asked, misunderstanding me completely. He probably thought I meant friend since my Spanish was so bad. “Where’s the Chicano at, your friend?” he asked once more.

“He’s not a Chicano. *No es un Mexicano*. He’s a white guy,” I told him.

“A *gringo*!” Chuy was shocked. “*Mikito*, let me tell you something. *Los gringos o los bolios*, whatever you want to call them...they don’t care about *ojo*. They don’t even think about it. Don’t worry about it. Let them deal with it themselves.”

“But Chuy, you can do something about it even if they don’t know about it,” I told him. But before I even finished what I wanted to say, he interrupted me.

“*Mikito*, let me help the Chicanos with their problems right now. It’s not right to use our ways for other people. Let *los hijos*, the children and people of *la raza*...let the Chicanos be fed first. It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs, the *gringos*.”

“*En serio?* Are you serious Chuy? But Chuy, even *los perros*, even the dogs get to eat the children’s crumbs that fall under the table. This gringo, *este perro* that we’re talking about. His name is Tod and he’s my partner, not my friend, but my life partner, *mi compañero*, my *novio*. And because of that, he does care about me and he does care about those things I care about. He does care about *ojo*. And he is entitled to the same things we’re entitled to.”

Chuy paused for a moment as if to think about what I just said. “Are you serious *Mikito*? *En serio?*” he asked me.

“Seriously. *Somos* gay. Tod and I are gay. And you know what? *Somos* Latinos. You and me Chuy. All of us, *somos familia*.” I declared pointing to all those in my immediate vicinity. I was never so bold and never as scared as I was in that moment. Chuy’s eyes were wide open and he looked at me as if he was in shock at what I said.

After a few seconds, which felt like long minutes of silence, Chuy responded, “Wow *Mikito*, you know what? *Sabes que*, because you said that, *por favor* go home and you will find your *compañero* healed.”

At first I was filled with joy, but then I wondered if Chuy was lying to me. What about the cleansing and the saying of prayers over a person with *ojo*? What about the egg



that Chuy is supposed rub over a person in order to capture all the negative energy in a person's body?

“And what about the *limpia* Chuy?” You’re not going to say any prayers or do a cleansing? Nothing?

With the hint of a smile, Chuy looked at intently saying, “*Mikito*, the *platica* that we just had, just now...that was a *limpia*. We all just had a healing. *Vete Mikito*. Go home to your partner, *tu pareja*.”

“*Gracias*, Chuy. Thank you so much.” I couldn’t believe it. Did that just happen?

“*Mikito, somos familia*,” he said to me while also glancing over towards my mother. And with that, he continued on with those who were there to see him. I returned to my apartment and found Tod feeling much better. I felt better too. Tod was healed, but something greater happened that day. I didn’t have to feel like I was living a lie anymore. All the shame, the *verguenza*, left. Chuy performed yet another miracle, and he was a recipient in it just as the rest of us were. Some of us were gay, and some of us were Latino, but we are all family.

### Reading Summation

Contrary to Ursula King, there is much to lose when we challenge power!<sup>101</sup>  
Chicano gays were excluded from the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 70s because of *machismo* and cultural integrity notions which thought homosexuality could not be

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<sup>101</sup>“Reflections on Biblical Texts,” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 203.

included in a Chicana/o nationalism.<sup>102</sup> *Nepantla* to them was scary and confusing, instead of inclusive and hopeful. As Kwok Pui Lan says, “there is always an ‘other’ within the ‘other.’”<sup>103</sup> The risks in speaking up and out are great and not to be discounted, but there is so much more to gain. Jesus realized that Gentiles can be served with no loss to Jews,<sup>104</sup> and Chuy realized that white gay *Americanos* can be served with no loss to Chicana/os. The challenge for gay Chicana/os and for others, including straight Chicana/os and white homosexuals, is to recognize the gay Chicana/o experience as an equally valid human experience. As Comstock writes, “Although we are...encouraged to include others not like ourselves, we are also encouraged to insist on our own inclusion and recognition by others, to express ourselves, to count ourselves as one of those who needs to be heard and received by others.”<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup>David William Foster, *Chicano/Latino Homoerotic Identities* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), 55.

<sup>103</sup>Kwok Pui-Lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1995), 82.

<sup>104</sup>Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark,” *Semeia* 28 (1983): 36.

<sup>105</sup>Gary David Comstock, *Gay Theology Without Apology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1993), 135.

## CHAPTER 4

### **NEPANTLA: BIBLICAL READING STRATEGIES FOR QUEER LATINA/OS**

*“The deconstruction of oppressive readings is only the first step toward the reconstruction of liberating ones.”*

-Pablo A. Jimenez

Everyone has an agenda when approaching scripture, whether conscious of such or not. Many folks pick up a bible hoping to find some good news for their life. The goal of trying to find some type of good news in scripture is an agenda. Whenever one looks at the biblical texts, finding almost anything one wants is one turn of a page away. If one is looking for erotica in scripture, one need only turn to the Song of Songs. If one is looking for an affirmation of the economically oppressed or spiritually depressed, one need only turn to the beatitudes in Luke 6 and Matthew 5. If one is looking for rape in scripture, one need only turn to the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13. Hope, fear, terror, peace, misogyny, racism, violence, sex— almost any subject can be found in the biblical texts as long as a person is looking for it. For what am I looking?

In chapter three, I looked at the Syrophoenician passage in the Gospel of Mark with the intention of finding my story within Mark’s story. My story includes my family’s story. My story includes my extended family’s story. My story includes the story of my ancestors. My story includes the memory of my cultural past. For that reason, I included all aspects of the *nepantla* middle space in which I find myself. My indigenous past, evident in the cultural traditions of *curanderismo*, is read alongside the text. My queer middle space, evident in my personal relationships, is read alongside the text. My tensions, confusion, and fears of *nepantla* are read alongside the text. My agency and hope of the possibilities within *nepantla* are read alongside the biblical text.

My initial question in this academic endeavor is how to develop biblical reading strategies which can affirm the identity and experience of queer Latina/os. For me, the answer comes by way of a hermeneutics of *nepantla*. For many queer Latina/os, daily life is lived on the margins, in the shadows, and within middle spaces. *Lo cotidiano* is *nepantla*. Queer Latina/os are already living in *nepantla*, even though it is not named as such. If queer Latina/os are given the opportunity to learn about the middle space known as *nepantla*, I believe they will be given a new set of eyes by which to interpret the struggles of the everyday.

Although some may argue that the concept of *nepantla* is already utilized in the concept of *mestizaje*, I would argue for a privileging of the indigenous, which for me can only come about through *nepantla*, not *mestizaje*. Although *mestizaje* is born amidst the conquest of *el indígena*, *una lucha* like no other, *nepantla* is born in the neutral space of “being” *indígena*. Though *mestizaje* can incorporate multiple identities, unfortunately the queer Latina/o experience, in my opinion, has been diminished, neglected, and lost by a blurring of our queer *cotidiano*. As mentioned in chapter one, the lived experiences of queer Latina/os is glossed over by Latina/o scholars, especially when specific queer issues like gay marriage and gender performance are not dealt with explicitly. *Mestizaje* simply gives name to the discomforts and tensions of the middle spaces queer Latina/os encounter; in fact, *mestizaje* accentuates the discomforts. *Nepantla* offers an opportunity to accentuate potentiality and hope. With a hermeneutics of *nepantla*, what does a queer Latina/o biblical reading strategy (or agenda) look like?

### Privileging *La Indígena*

One strategy is to privilege one's indigenous past. That is, recalling indigenous concepts, experiences, and ways of being from one's specific past as one reads and interprets scripture. Kwok Pui-lan cautions "contemporary" natives from claiming privileged status in understanding natives of the past.<sup>106</sup> Seeing so many similarities between the text and the experience of past natives might possibly enhance the *we* vs. *they* dichotomy that has "given so much power to white people."<sup>107</sup> For example, in the conquest of the New World, it was easier for Europeans to justify colonization and the proselytizing of indigenous natives if the claim was made that the latter were so much different than Europeans. Of course, such difference enhanced the *we* vs. *they* dichotomy which I believe led to the exploitation of indigenous cultures. If oppressed peoples today claim a radical difference between what is indigenous and what is not, there is still a risk of the *we* vs. *they* dichotomy being enhanced. To be clear, I am not advocating the privileging of "the one and only" indigenous or native experience; I am advocating that the queer Latina/o reader privilege her/his specific indigenous past. For example, I privilege concepts of *curanderismo* because they are specific to my family's experience, especially with several *curandera/os* in my family. I would not be so quick to lift it up if I have not had experience with *curanderismo*. Even though I advocate for an enhancement of queer Latina/o cultural memory with respect to indigenous culture, such exposure to

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<sup>106</sup>Kwok Pui-lan, "Jesus/The Native: Biblical Studies from a Postcolonial Perspective" in *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy* eds. Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 81.

<sup>107</sup>Kwok, 82.

indigenous historical experiences does not necessarily mean every Latina/o will resonate with every bit of what is indigenous. One must still interpret how indigenous particularities relate to one's contemporary life. In some cases, an imaginative recollection will take place where one might appropriate the concept of *curanderismo*, for example, and begin to study and practice folk healing methods. If so, then one would begin to take a tradition and make it real for them, creating a new middle space which can still bring healing and hope.

There is an element of recalling our cultural memory, specifically our queer indigenous cultural memory. By assuming that queer indigenous folks have been a reality in our Mesoamerican ancestry even before the Conquest, we remember the triumphs of overcoming obstacles in the midst of being in the middle spaces of our *cotidianos*, but we also remember the tragedies.<sup>108</sup>

### ***Affirmation of Nuestro Cotidiano***

We read to affirm what is ordinary in our life, so we read scripture with a goal of being affirmed in our identity and lived experience. I believe all people want to be validated in some respect. Whether by acknowledgment for being on the right career path or validated for one's gifts and skill sets, all humanity wants to be affirmed. If one wants an affirmation, then one must look for an affirmation. For example, as a queer Chicano, I look for gay characters in pop culture, movies, and books. I look for the affirmation of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in film and literature. I do the same when reading

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<sup>108</sup>Barbara Reid, *Taking Up the Cross: New Testament Interpretations Through Latina and Feminist Eyes* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 6.

scripture. Since we as humans read with our social location in mind, our specific locations, including our middle spaces, must be affirmed. For queer Latina/os, different sexualities must be affirmed. Bilinguality must be affirmed. Ethnic hybridity must be affirmed. Even tensions and struggles in life must be affirmed. The goal is for our queer Latina/o experience to be validated and celebrated.

Reading in groups (*en conjunto*<sup>109</sup>) allows for a corrective to be present so that one's specific bias towards validation is kept in context of the community. After all, what might be affirming for one individual might be oppressing for another. Even though the goal is affirmation, one must keep in mind that there are many diverse Latina/o experiences within the queer community. Affirmation of *Nuestro Cotidiano* must be include the grounding of community.

Of course, some texts may be privileged over others if those others do not affirm who we are and who we are called to be. But, some of those texts of terror (including the Syrophoenician passage from Mark's gospel<sup>110</sup>) may very well affirm us by way of affirming the struggles that we go through as being valid. Reading in order to see one's story and one's struggles is a valid strategy for queer Latina/os. The Syrophoenician Woman may affirm our multiple identities as people who constantly live in the liminal spaces of *nepantla*.

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<sup>109</sup>*En conjunto* implies reading in groups, reading together, and/or reading in community. See page 65 below.

<sup>110</sup>Being called a dog as the Syrophoenician Woman is called by Jesus, makes the passage one of terror, but also one of overcoming ignorance.

### *Buscando las Putas*

Until relatively recently, most inquiries into the sexual dynamics of queer Mesoamerican indigenous folks failed to find anything meaningful. Thankfully, scholars continued to ask and seek, and now we have the beginnings of a treasure trove with regard to the sexual lives of queer indigenous folk in Mesoamerica just before the Conquest and in colonial Mexico. When scholars were met with characterizations of indigenous folks as *putas* (like from Franciscan Friar, Bernardino de Sahagún), a closer look was taken and we found sexual “others” but not “whores” as Sahagún would have us believe.

When reading scripture, we should do so with a curiosity bent on looking for possible places in the text for queer sexual activity. Timothy Koch calls it “cruising as a methodology.”<sup>111</sup> I call it *buscando las putas* (looking for whores) given the context of the queer indigenous experience. Whatever one calls it, one can utilize a strategy of looking for queer activity, sexual and non-sexual, in ancient texts. In chapter two, I noted how I suspected queer sexual activity might have gone on at Nahua bathhouses just as sexual activity occurs in present-day bathhouses. I followed the hunch and found research confirming my hunch. Of course, even though gender and sexual performance might be similar, one must exercise caution so that contemporary day concepts are not unjustly projected onto ancient historical periods. For example, I would never use the phrase

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<sup>111</sup>Timothy R. Koch, “Cruising as Methodology: Homoeroticism and the Scriptures,” in *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*. ed. Ken Stone (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001).



same-gender loving people to express the queer sexual experiences of Mesoamerican indigenous folk in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but I can still follow my hunch and see what I find. *Buscando las putas* is a way of looking at the text with new eyes, to possibly see more than has ever been seen before in the biblical text.

### **Reading *en Conjunto***

Instead of reading alone, another possible strategy for queer Latina/os is to read in community. When leading bible studies, I am constantly amazed at how much insight comes about from simply listening to how a scripture passage affects the participants. More often than not, I am able to grasp more about the current struggles and immediate context of the people with whom I am reading, and such an endeavor in itself begins to show a *teología en conjunto*.<sup>112</sup> My experience with queer Latina/os has shown that solidarity and community can be built with group readings and studies instead of people treading on their own. Because safe space is built between people in groups, an atmosphere conducive for open conversation is established. People learn more together than they could ever achieve on their own. It has been my experience that growth and collaborative thinking and conversation comes about best when there is a combination of a didactic and facilitated conversation within the group. Facilitation moves beyond one person telling everyone else what one needs to know and allows for truth to come from everyone. When operated in a collaborative spirit, public group readings and studies of

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<sup>112</sup>*Teología en conjunto* refers to theologizing in community.

scripture emphasize intimacy, diversity, and a coming together to share one another's pains, struggles, and joys.<sup>113</sup>

Furthermore, reading scripture and doing *teología en conjunto* in public spaces brings back a cultural memory all in itself, by way of the lectors found in historic cigar rolling shops in Cuba. As cigar rollers hand-rolled cigars, the cigar factory owners hired a lector to publicly read to the factory workers. Cigar factory lectors read newspapers, magazines, romance novels and various other works of literature.<sup>114</sup> The lector had good diction and a strong voice. These public readings were really performances, not unlike the public reading of the gospels to their respective communities. Cigar workers loved the great stories and the sense of celebration and reading *en conjunto*, even if one was not really reading but enjoying what the lector read.<sup>115</sup> In any case, why not return to such public spectacles and ritualize again, reading with other queer Latina/os? Just as cigar factory workers were educated through what was read and the discussions that came after, so can we.

In the small group offerings that I facilitated, I quickly learned that queer Latina/os have much to gain when reading *en conjunto*. Because of the many cultural and spiritual preferences/differences which exist between Mexicans, Dominicans, Cubans, and/or Colombians (or Catholics and Evangelicals), it is important to emphasize

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<sup>113</sup>Jose David Rodriguez and Loida I. Martell-Otero, *Teología en Conjunto: A Collaborative Hispanic Protestant Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 1.

<sup>114</sup><http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8406641.stm>.

<sup>115</sup>Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 23.

facilitation as opposed to simply offering a didactic. The latter creates an atmosphere of *I* vs. *everyone else* and group members sense the power dynamics of the *teacher—student* relationship. Because of the power dynamics, there were many times when group members dug their heels in the ground and refused to be open to anything that was offered. For example, when I began a session on *mestizaje* and offered that all Latina/os can embrace the word *mestizo*, many groups members became offended and shut down in offering anything in conversation. For some, *mestizo* was a pejorative term that presumed ignorance. I was teaching *mestizaje* as something we should all embrace because certain Latina/o scholars say so, but many Latina/os in my group were resistant. In another session, when I offered up *mestizaje* as one way in which Latina/os embrace hybridity, people were much more open to the concept. Of course in the latter group session, after offering *mestizaje* as only one way to embrace hybridity, I then specifically asked how each group member embraces hybridity/multiple identities. What followed was a fruitful dialogue where group members were willing to “try on” and test not only the ideas of one another, but also of *mestizaje* and *nepantla*. Reading *en conjunto* can be empowering and can relieve the stress of the middle space of reading alone.

Whether privileging one’s indigenous past, affirming one’s daily experiences, searching for sexual others, or reading together in groups, Latina/os are able to read the bible with fresh eyes. The development of biblical reading strategies for queer Latina/os is an ongoing praxis for lay folks. I offer the reading strategies in this chapter in hopes that queer Latina/os who constantly negotiate *nepantla* in their lives can begin to receive affirmation that the middle spaces of *lo cotidiano* do not have to be frightening, but rather

empowering. I now offer a sample curriculum, utilizing the above mentioned reading strategies, for small group bible study. The curriculum includes didactics regarding *xochihua* and the warriors in Nahuatl society and the story of Jesus and the Roman Centurion. The curriculum also includes images for reflection, bilingual music, indigenous poetic prayer, and a journaling exercise.

### **Sample Curriculum**

Latina/o Small Group Bible Study: Reading *en Conjunto*  
“*Xochihua and the Centurion’s Servant*”  
(60-90 min)

#### Set Up

Place fresh flowers on tables all across the room, so participants are able to immediately notice them. The flowers represent *Xochihua*, the “Quetzal Flower.” Hang or display a large image of **Figure 3. (*Xochihua*)** for all to clearly see, or make separate copies of the image for everyone. Journals should be provided also as participants might feel led to write down notes or prayerful thoughts.

#### Opening Prayer

After reading the *Nahuatl* “song of reflection,” we open up with an extemporaneous, affirming and inclusive prayer.

*“Now let us begin. Already there has come  
the sweet-smelling flower; may it please you.  
It is going to rain flowers;  
may they please you!”*

*“I am scattering many different flowers.  
I come to offer songs, intoxicating flowers.  
Oh, I am [the One], who comes from there,  
where the water flows.”*

*I come to offer songs, intoxicating flowers.*<sup>116</sup>„

(Insert extemporaneous prayer here... *Amen.*)

Opening Song: *Open the Eyes of My Heart* by Paul Baloché

We recognize God's presence and center ourselves with music (CD or accompanist), singing in Spanish and English (bilinguality).<sup>117</sup> We ask the Divine to open the eyes of our hearts, so that we may see things from our cultural indigenous pasts that we have never seen before. We ask the Divine to open the eyes of our hearts, so that scripture may come alive in a fresh, new way. One may listen reflectively or sing as one chooses.

*Abre los ojos de mi corazón  
Abre mis ojos mi Dios  
Yo quiero verte  
Yo quiero verte (2x).*

*Y verte alto y exaltado  
brillando en la luz de tu gloria  
derrama tu poder y amor  
mientras cantamos santo santo (2x).*

*Santo, santo, santo  
Santo, santo, santo  
Santo, santo, santo  
Yo quiero verte.*

*Open the eyes of my heart, Lord  
Open the eyes of my heart  
I want to see You*

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<sup>116</sup>Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Native Mesoamerican Spirituality: Ancient Myths, Discourses, Stories, Doctrines, Hymns, Poems from the Aztec, Yucatec, Quiche-Maya and Other Sacred Traditions* (NY: Paulist Press, 1980), 205.

<sup>117</sup>The entire sample curriculum can be translated and/or simply discussed in a bilingual format if one chooses. For the sake of space in the current project, I only included the Spanish version of the opening song.

*I want to see You (2x).*

*To see You high and lifted up  
Shinin' in the light of Your glory  
Pour out Your power and love  
As we sing holy, holy, holy.*

*Holy, holy, holy  
Holy, holy, holy  
Holy, holy, holy  
I want to see You.*

Visual Reflection 1: Xochihua

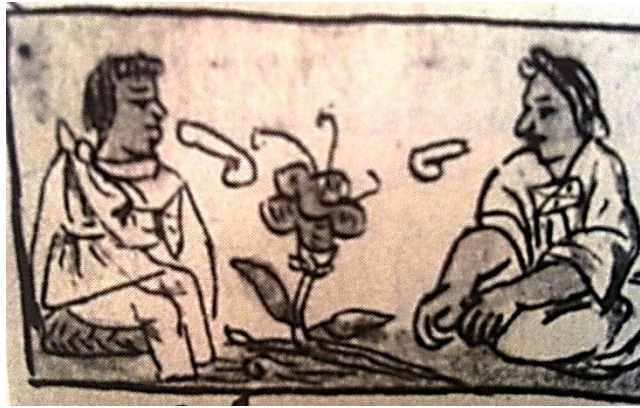


Figure 5. The Xochihua, a cross-dresser, from the *Florentine Codex*.

After asking the participants to meditate on the image of the *xochihua* for one minute, ask them what they see in the picture. Expect responses inferring that two people are sitting around a flower, talking to each other. Some participants might notice two men while others might notice a man and a woman. If different responses are offered, embrace

them because the image is a bit misleading. After everyone has a chance to offer what they see in the image, explain to the participants that the 16<sup>th</sup> century image is actually depicting a man sitting with a cross-dresser—a *xochihua*.

Highlight the following talking points:<sup>118</sup>

- *Xochihua* were sexual “others” in ancient *Mesoamerican* indigenous society. They were cross-dressers, or biological men who dressed as women.
- *Xochihua* are usually portrayed with flowers in texts (*Florentine Codex*) because of their relation to the goddess of fertility and sexuality—*Xochiquetzal*.
- *Xochihua* were tolerated in ancient *Nahua* society. They performed household chores, cleaned the temples, and made themselves sexually available to nobles in society (The image is probably a noble and a *xochihua*.)
- *Xochihua* also accompanied warriors whenever war broke out. They assisted warriors with carrying supplies and also provided sexual favors and services to them.
- Although strict gender roles were the norm and any blurring of gender roles was generally frowned upon in *Nahua* society, *xochihua* were the exception. They had an institutionalized role amongst the nobles and warriors, and non-nobles were aware

Ask the following questions for discussion:

- Does it surprise you that ancient Nahuas permitted such blatant cross-dressing and “queer” figures in their society? Why or why not?
- Why do you think society frowned up the blurring of gender roles with the exception of the *xochihuas*? Can you see any parallels today in the Latina/o community?

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<sup>118</sup>Pete Sigal, “Queer Nahuatl: Sahagun’s Faggots and Sodomites, Lesbians and Hermaphrodites,” in *Sexual Encounters, Sexual Collisions: Alternative Sexualities in Colonial Mesoamerica*. ed. by Neil Whitehead (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 23.

- What kind of relationships do you think might have developed between warriors and *xochihuas*, especially in times of war (purely sexual or something more)?<sup>119</sup>

### Visual Reflection 2: The Roman Centurion



Figure 6. Centurion with the Paralyzed Servant.

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<sup>119</sup>While one does want to be cautious of projecting contemporary relationship/sexual dynamics onto Nahuatl society, the goal of the question is to help participants dig deeper and wonder if there might be more to *xochihua* sexual relationships than what scholars know (*Buscando las Putas*).



Before allowing the participants to meditate on the image of the Roman “Centurion with a Paralyzed Servant”<sup>120</sup> for one brief minute, ask them if they think it is possible that a *xochihua*—warrior relationship from Nahuatl society would have any similarities to a Roman soldier/ centurion—servant relationship almost 2,000 years ago. Is it possible?

#### Scripture Reading *En Conjunto*

Participants reflectively listen as one or several people read Matthew 8.5-13 aloud:

*When Jesus entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, ‘Rabbi, my servant (pais) is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.’ And he said to him, ‘I will come and cure him.’*

*The centurion answered, ‘Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my boy will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, “Go”, and he goes, and to another, “Come”, and he comes, and to my slave, “Do this”, and the slave does it.’ When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, ‘The truth is, I’ve found no one in Israel with such great faith.*

*I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ And to the centurion Jesus said, ‘Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.’ And the servant was healed in that hour.*

Ask the participants to ponder on these questions before highlighting the talking points:

- Is the centurion’s servant more than just a servant?

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<sup>120</sup>Artwork by Harry Anderson. For more links to the artist’s work, please visit <http://www.archatl.com/ministries/disabilities/gospelexamples.html>.

- What is meant by the word “servant?” Can the word “servant” actually refer to a sexual partner or male beloved? Is such even possible for a Roman soldier in the first century?

### Queer Reflection *En Conjunto*

Highlight the following talking points after posing the questions:<sup>121</sup>

- In chapter eight of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is approached by a Roman centurion, a soldier of rank, who commands his own foot soldiers. The centurion tells Jesus that his “servant” is in distress. The word “servant” (*Pais* in Greek) refers to a boy or male beloved, but in an army/military context, it usually refers a young man (or boy).<sup>122</sup>
- In ancient Rome, Soldiers were also prone to have homosexual encounters. By way of pederasty (*pais* and *erastes* = boy love), many Romans thought there was a time for man-boy relationships, but the time eventually came for marriage. Soldiers had boy lovers (younger soldiers), not unlike the ancient Greeks. It was thought that soldiers would fight harder and be willing to die for each another if a mentor/sexual pederastic relationship developed.
- Pederasty was seen by Jews to be a vice, especially religious Jews, but Jesus never demonstrates squeamishness about sexual irregularities in the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>123</sup> In 8.8, when Jesus offers to come visit the centurion’s “servant,” the centurion responds with claims of his unworthiness if Jesus came under his roof. Why the nervousness? Is the centurion worried about how Jesus will respond to his relationship with his servant? Maybe the centurion and his “servant” really are in a quasi-queer relationship and because religious Jews revile such queerness, the centurion would rather have Jesus heal his lover from afar?
- Jesus, who might recognize the internalized shame on the part of the centurion, heals the centurion’s lover or servant or sexual partner, without

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<sup>121</sup>The reflection is based mostly on Thomas Bohache’s article, “Matthew” in *The Queer Commentary*. Edited by Deryn Guest, Robert Goss, Mona West and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006).

<sup>122</sup>For a fuller discussion, see Theodore Jennings, *The Man Jesus Loved: Homoerotic Narratives from the New Testament* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003).

<sup>123</sup>In Matt. 21.31, Jesus states that prostitutes (sexually disreputable folks) are making it into the kingdom of heaven ahead of everyone else.

mentioning any condemnation. Jesus has the opportunity to condemn such a possible “queer” relationship, but instead, Jesus tells us that he has found no one in Israel with such great faith.

#### Discussion: *Nepantla en Conjunto*

Ask the following questions for discussion:

- What do you make of the centurion’s relationship with his servant? From your perspective, is it purely a servant-type relationship, something more sexual, or actual love?
- Why do you think Jesus never becomes squeamish around queer relationships or sexual irregularities in first century society? What can we learn from Jesus as he operates comfortably in liminal area/spaces?
- In 8.8, the centurion is hesitant about Jesus coming to his home. Can you relate to the centurion’s fear of possibly being “outed” and ridiculed by Jesus? What do you make of Jesus’s response?
- Why do we never hear about the “homosexual” experiences of Roman soldiers in the first century? Why do we never hear of *xochihuas* and Nahuatl warriors having socially-accepted sexual relationships? Why do we tend to either intentionally or unintentionally forget about our cultural pasts?
- Knowing that sexually minorities, or “others,” were not only present in ancient Roman society, but also present in Latina/o Mesoamerican indigenous society, do you feel affirmed that our ancestors experienced some of the same tensions and trials that we experience? How so?

#### Prayer Exercise: Remembering

Participants are invited to journal and take note of a few areas in which they need their eyes to be continually opened (i.e. spiritual, personal, relational life, cultural past).

Participants may offer prayer requests when finishing journaling. After participants offer their prayer requests, the facilitator or another person offers a closing prayer.

Closing Song: *Open the Eyes of My Heart* by Paul Baloché

Finally, participants are encouraged to sing together one last time, asking the Divine to continue opening up the eyes of their hearts. May our eyes be open today and forever. Amen.

*Abre los ojos de mi corazón  
Abre mis ojos mi Dios  
Yo quiero verte  
Yo quiero verte (2x).*

*Y verte alto y exaltado  
brillando en la luz de tu gloria*

*derrama tu poder y amor  
mientras cantamos santo santo (2x).*

*Santo, santo, santo  
Santo, santo, santo  
Santo, santo, santo  
Yo quiero verte.*

*Open the eyes of my heart, Lord  
Open the eyes of my heart  
I want to see You  
I want to see You (2x).*

*To see You high and lifted up  
Shinin' in the light of Your glory  
Pour out Your power and love  
As we sing holy, holy, holy.*

*Holy, holy, holy  
Holy, holy, holy  
Holy, holy, holy  
I want to see You.*

## CONCLUSION

*What We Know about Our Gods...*<sup>124</sup>

*From our ancestors,  
from them have we inherited  
our pattern of life,  
which in truth did they hold;  
in reverence they held,  
they honored, our gods.  
They taught us  
all their rules of worship,  
all their ways of honoring the gods.  
Thus before them do we prostrate ourselves;  
in their names we bleed ourselves;  
our oaths we keep,  
incense we burn,  
and sacrifices we offer.*

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<sup>124</sup>Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Native Mesoamerican Spirituality: Ancient Myths, Discourses, Stories, Doctrines, Hymns, Poems from the Aztec, Yucatec, Quiche-Maya and Other Sacred Traditions* (NY: Paulist Press, 1980), 215. This is the first stanza of a 1524 Aztec poem about their ancestral knowledge on the subject of religion.

While participating as a student with the Hispanic Summer Program (HSP)<sup>125</sup> in 2010, I became intrigued with indigenous spiritualities by way of a class offered by Dr. Lara Medina from California State University Northridge entitled, “Indigenous Ways of Knowing the Sacred.” The issue of sexuality came up quite a bit during the program, mainly due to my intrigue in how ancient Nahuas viewed constructions of sexual identity. That summer was also the first two week session to include a faculty/student panel discussion on the topic on “Latina/o Churches and our LGBT Brothers and Sisters.” It was the first ever public conversation on the subject of queer Latina/os since HSP’s founding in the late 1980s. How ironic that a program founded to bring Latina/o students together for the purposes of *teología en conjunto* had neglected to publicly affirm queer Latina/os who participated in the summer program all these many years! Irony aside, I later learned of a tense middle space that existed between the more conservative churches and seminaries from which many Latina/o students came and the staff of HSP. A few years earlier, a professor proudly affirmed LGBT Latina/os in a public session, and when the conservative supporters of HSP found out, many threatened to pull their funding of HSP and of students who attend HSP. HSP was and still is navigating through its own middle and liminal spaces.

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<sup>125</sup>The Hispanic Summer Program is an ecumenical program that seeks to heal the divisions in the Latina/o community fueled by denominational and theological differences. As a Hispanic program, the HSP tries to find ways to restore connections and build bridges between Hispanics and non-Hispanics – among others by enhancing the awareness and appreciation that non-Hispanic scholars, ministers, and administrators have of Latina/o contributions to the past, present, and future of our churches and our nation. Every year, HSP offers two week intensive classes with that focus on academics from the perspectives of Latina/os. For more information, visit <http://hispanicsummerprogram.org/>.

A queer liminal space known as *nepantla* is not foreign to us; in fact, it never has been. Somehow we have learned to survive in the liminal spaces, even amidst of churches and academics blurring the lines of our existence. Issues pertaining to the queer Latina/o experience barely receive mention from Latina/o scholars and practitioners, yet we are still struggling and surviving *la lucha*. It seems as though the *nepantla* paradigm fits us quite well. Whether we like being in the middle spaces or not, our queer indigenous roots show us that we have always managed and will always have the capacity to negotiate the intricacies of *nepantla* liminality.

As I think about developing more curriculum on expanding the cultural memory of queer Latina/os, I am reminded of the need for more ritual, both public and private, in helping recall and retain memories of our queer indigenous ancestors. Surely there are ways to expand cultural memory in small group settings as well as larger church gatherings. Whether through site visits of sweat lodges, class intensives on indigenous epistemologies, or *curanderismo* immersion experiences, the possibilities are endless in expanding our queer indigenous cultural memory.

With regard to biblical reading strategies, the challenge still stands as how to further bridge the gap between Latina/o academics and queer Latina/os at the grassroots level. Proposals for reading strategies at the local church level help, but more attention is needed for practitioners on the ground. The Latina/os in my congregations and I are only beginning to scratch the surface of what could be in terms of reading the bible anew. How can we provide better opportunities for queer Latina/os, practitioners, and academics to all come together and share ideas and participate in doing *teología en*

*conjunto?* Let us be reminded that “*nepantla* is the liminal space that can confuse its occupants but also has the ability to transform them.”<sup>126</sup> Amen.

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<sup>126</sup>Medina, “Nepantla,” 256.



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